

Advent Ethics

Christian Reflection
A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS

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Contents

Introduction	8
Robert B. Kruschwitz	
Redeeming Time	11
Kimberlee Conway Ireton	
What Are We Waiting For?	17
Claude F. Mariottini	
The Three Advents	26
Fr. James Conner, OCSO	
Advent of the Heart:	
The Prison Meditations of Alfred Delp, SJ	33
Jenny Howell	
The Advent Fast	41
Thomas Turner	
Distinctive Traditions of Advent	47
Amber and John Inscore Essick	
Advent Themes in Christian Art	54
Heidi J. Hornik	
<i>The Dream of Saint Joseph</i>	
Georges de La Tour	
<i>The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist</i>	
Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio	
<i>Saint John the Baptist</i>	
Michele Tosini	
O God Among Us, Come	63
Robert B. Kruschwitz	
Prayer Services	67
Robert B. Kruschwitz	

continued

The Advent Invitation	79
Larry Parsley	
Meeting God in the Church Year	83
Kimberlee Conway Ireton	
Taking Advent Seriously	89
Mark Oldenburg	
Editors	94
Contributors	96

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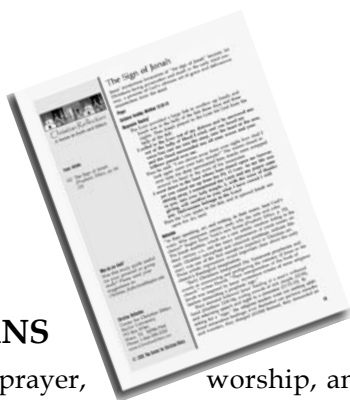
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REDEEMING TIME

The church year is most meaningful, formative, and transformative when we embrace its seasons and their rhythms. It is necessarily communal, pushing us back to Christ, to the stories of his life and to the rites by which his disciples re-enact and enter into his life through worship.

WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

Through images of the mountain of the Lord's house, the peaceful kingdom, the desert highway, and the child Immanuel, the prophet Isaiah describes the coming of the new son of David and the establishment of the reign of God. Isaiah's oracles in the Advent liturgy challenge us to become the bearers of good news to the poor and the marginalized of society.

THE THREE ADVENTS

For Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) and his modern interpreter, Thomas Merton, the season of Advent is a "sacrament" of the presence of God in his world, in the mystery of Christ at work through his Church, preparing in a hidden, obscure way for the final manifestation of his kingdom.

ADVENT OF THE HEART

Condemned to die in a Nazi prison, Father Alfred Delp discovered that Advent is the time for being deeply shaken—the time not only to remember the birth of the Christ Child, but to participate in this unfolding and ultimate revelation of God that began in the Holy Night.

THE ADVENT FAST

As we recover and creatively appropriate the tradition of fasting during Advent, we identify with and proclaim God's narrative of love in a counter-cultural way. We resist the instant gratification, materialism, and gluttony that increasingly characterize cultural holiday celebrations.

DISTINCTIVE TRADITIONS OF ADVENT

Lighting candles on an Advent wreath, celebrating St. Lucia's Day, and decorating a Jesse Tree can help us faithfully narrate and prepare for the arrival of the Christ. These practices involve hearing the ancient and future stories of salvation that are formative for understanding the Incarnation.

Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

Marking time by the grand Christian narrative molds the character of our discipleship. During Advent, the first season of the church year, we reexamine our desires as we prepare to welcome Christ, the Desire of Nations.

The church year that begins with the season of Advent—also called the Christian year or the liturgical year—“is the year that sets out to attune the life of the Christian to the life of Jesus, the Christ,” Joan Chittister has written. “It proposes, year after year, to immerse us over and over again into the sense and substance of the Christian life until, eventually, we become what we say we are—followers of Jesus all the way to the heart of God.” This issue on the season of Advent commences an occasional series of *Christian Reflection* that will explore how the church year’s two cycles of preparation, celebration, and rejoicing—Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany; and Lent, Easter, and Pentecost—as well as distinctive emphases within ordinary time, mold our discipleship.

“The church year continually pushes me back to Christ, to the stories of his life and to the rites—especially the Eucharist—by which we, his disciples, re-enact his life and enter into it,” Kimberlee Conway Ireton writes in *Redeeming Time* (p. 11). Reflecting on how the church year draws us into the corporate body of Christ, she observes: “To be formed in community means our individual needs can be met by the community, our desires can be transformed by the vision of a larger purpose, and our fears can be assuaged by the assurance that we are not alone.”

In a companion review article, *Meeting God in the Church Year* (p. 83), Ireton commends four books that explore the church year in greater detail. Bobby Gross in *Living the Christian Year: Time to Inhabit the Story of God* and Robert Webber in *Ancient-Future Time: Forming Spirituality through the Christian Year* write as evangelicals who discovered the church year as adults.

Joan Chittister's *The Liturgical Year: The Spiraling Adventure of the Spiritual Life* reveals the deep reflection of a disciple who grew up breathing the air of liturgy. Adolf Adam's *The Liturgical Year: Its History and Its Meaning after the Reform of the Liturgy* exhibits an academic as well as a spiritual interest. "Though they view the church year through different lens," Ireton concludes, "all four authors want their readers to know what they know: that living this way shapes our lives into a cruciform pattern in which we, as followers of Jesus, become more and more like him."

Advent, the first season in the church year, is a time of expectant waiting and preparation for the coming of Christ. We prepare our minds and hearts for both the celebration of Jesus' birth and his return in glory. In *What Are We Waiting For?* (p. 17), Claude Mariottini explains why Isaiah's prophecies about the new son of David and the establishment of God's reign are prominent in the Advent liturgy. The earliest Christians used these oracles – about the mountain of the Lord's house, the peaceful kingdom, the desert highway, and the child Immanuel – to interpret Jesus' birth, ministry, and suffering.

"All too often, Advent is seen simply as a preparation for Christmas and the birth of Christ," Fr. James Conner, OCSO, admits. We neglect the richer possibilities in what Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) called Christ's "threefold coming" – to Bethlehem, to our hearts today, and to the world in judgment. For Bernard and his modern interpreter Thomas Merton, the season of Advent "is a 'sacrament' of the presence of God in his world, in the mystery of Christ at work through his Church, preparing in a hidden, obscure way for the final manifestation of his kingdom," Conner explains in *The Three Advents* (p. 26).

In *Advent of the Heart: The Prison Meditations of Alfred Delp, SJ* (p. 33), Jenny Howell delves into the remarkable insights of a twentieth-century martyr. While he was imprisoned by the Nazis, awaiting his inevitable execution, Delp smuggled Advent meditations to his Munich congregation on slips of paper hidden in his dirty laundry. "We run the risk of concealing Christmas behind bourgeois customs and sentimentality," Delp warns. "Yet perhaps the deep meaning is still hiding behind all those things. What this celebration is about is the founding of a final order for the world, a new center of meaning for all existence. We are not celebrating some children's holiday, but rather the fact that God has spoken His ultimate Word to the world."

Heidi Hornik examines three paintings with Advent themes. In *The Coming Light* (p. 54), she explains how images like Georges de La Tour's *The Dream of Saint Joseph* (cover) expressed the new devotion toward Joseph during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when he became a representative figure of a supportive father. In *Prepare the Way of the Lord* (p. 60), she reviews Michele Tosini's depiction in *Saint John the Baptist* of the young prophet's innocence, determination, and strength. In *Confronting the Powers* (p. 56) she examines the masterpiece of Caravaggio's career, *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist*, which reminds us how John, like the Messiah whose coming he foretold, challenged unjust powers and principalities.

The “O Antiphons” – seven ancient prayers that address God in Christ with striking messianic titles drawn from Israel’s prophetic writings – are among the richest treasures of Advent. In interrelated ways they voice the ultimate petition of Scripture – “Come, Lord Jesus.” Our translations of these haunting texts, wonderfully set to music by Kurt Kaiser (p. 63), may be sung in daily Advent prayer times (p. 67) or incorporated into other Advent worship services. We combine them in a liturgy of Advent music and lessons online at www.ChristianEthics.ws.

Taking Advent seriously as a time of preparation at the beginning of the church year is not easy when our ears are filled by the culture’s siren song of consumption. In *The Advent Fast* (p. 41), Thomas Turner urges us to recover and creatively appropriate the early church tradition of fasting during Advent in order to identify with and proclaim God’s narrative of love in a counter-cultural way. Larry Parsley’s *The Advent Invitation* (p. 79) highlights the Advent Conspiracy, an online resource that is helping congregations resist the instant gratification, materialism, and gluttony that increasingly characterize cultural holiday celebrations. Amber and John Inscore Essick, in *Distinctive Traditions of Advent* (p. 47), describe how lighting candles on an Advent wreath, celebrating St. Lucia’s Day, and decorating a Jesse Tree can help families and congregations faithfully narrate and prepare for the arrival of the Christ. “Squeezing another event into our busy December schedules might seem difficult,” they admit, “but reclaiming Advent requires that we come to terms with the fact that many of the festivities we enjoy during Advent are better suited for the season of Christmas.”

To prevent Advent from “being sucked into the gravity well of Christmas, or misunderstood as entirely a preparation for the Nativity,” Mark Oldenburg recommends resources that “shine a reassuring light on the true nature of Advent, presenting healthy, faithful, and attractive ways to observe the season” in *Taking Advent Seriously* (p. 89). Phyllis Tickle’s *Christmastide: Prayers for Advent through Epiphany from The Divine Hours* offers four daily services of prayer and reflection. Mary Lou Redding’s *While We Wait: Living the Questions of Advent* provides material for daily personal reflection on and weekly group study of the biblical figures of Tamar, Ruth, Elizabeth, Mary, and the Magi. *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas*, edited by members of the Bruderhof movement, is a fine collection of readings from across the centuries. And in *O Come Emmanuel: A Musical Tour of Daily Readings for Advent and Christmas*, Gordon Giles mines the magnificent musical heritage of Advent to guide daily reflection. “Each is a wonderful companion and guide for this season when our business is to recognize that we live in the meantime, when the promises of God are already but not yet fulfilled,” Oldenburg concludes. “Each helps us to cry out, with heart, hand, and voice, ‘Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.’” ❖

Redeeming Time

BY KIMBERLEE CONWAY IRETON

The church year is most meaningful, most formative, and most transformative when we embrace its seasons and their rhythms, allowing the life of Jesus to speak again and again into our own lives, seeking always to follow in the way Jesus leads us, year after year.

When I was a young girl, my sister and I always had Advent calendars in December. Each morning before school we opened one of the little doors to discover what lay behind it. And each morning we looked at each other and said, “Only fifteen days till Christmas!” “Only nine days till Christmas!”

We counted down each day until Christmas Eve in this way, our excitement mounting as the days passed and the house slowly transformed into a winter wonderland of ornament-laden tree and stocking-hung fireplace.

And, of course, there were the gifts, all lying beneath the tree, wrapped in green and gold and red paper, garlanded with bows and tied with ribbons. We’d pick them up and look at the little labels: “For Kimberlee,” “For Chris,” “For Jen,” “For Carol.” We’d feel the heft of each one, shake it a little to see if it made a sound, and try to guess what was inside.

For us, “Advent” was simply an adjective for “calendar,” and the calendar was a way to count the days until Christmas and the opening of all those wondrous gifts beneath the tree.

I am not sure when the shift occurred, when I came to know that Advent was about more than counting down the days till presents could be opened, but at some point between girlhood and adulthood such a shift in my way of seeing the month of December occurred. I still love the tree and the wreaths and the red and green decorations and, yes, the gifts. But even more, I love that this month of getting ready for Christmas marks the beginning of the Christian year. I love that it is a season of thoughtful preparation, of joyful

waiting. I love that Advent is a call to be mindful in the midst of what is often a crazy-busy month.

This is not to say it is easy to observe Advent in a culture where “Christmas” begins right after Halloween. It is not easy. A worthwhile life seldom is. And so I choose to live a little differently in December.

Actually, I choose to live a little differently all the time. It is just most obvious in December. Observing the church year has that effect on me. It has had that effect on countless others, too.

Marking time by the calendar of the Church instead of the calendars of our culture—the school year, the civic year, the fiscal year—sets you apart. It is not that I don’t also live by those other calendars; I live in the United States; I cannot help but live by them. But ordering my life by the Christian year means I am immersed year after year in the story of Jesus and the story of the Church. It means I look at time a little differently. And it means those cultural calendars are secondary to the church calendar.

Why do I choose to embrace the church year? What about this particular ordering of time is so compelling? And what effect does living according to the church calendar have on my moral and spiritual formation?



Before I can answer those questions, I want briefly to outline the structure of the church year.[†] Different traditions have slightly different names for some seasons and date some holy days differently, but the overall shape of the year remains constant regardless of tradition. Here I outline the tradition with which I am most familiar.

The church year—also called the Christian year or the liturgical year—is divided into two halves. The first half focuses on the life of Christ; the second, on the life of Christ’s body, the Church. All of our highest holy days—Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost—occur within the first half of the year.

Within the first half of the year are two cycles, which center on the holy days of Christmas and Easter. These cycles are comprised of a season of preparation (Advent and Lent), a season of celebration (Christmas and Easter), and a special day of rejoicing (Epiphany and Pentecost).

In the first cycle, Advent is the season of preparation for Christmas, which is the season of celebrating the birth of Christ. This cycle concludes with Epiphany. In the second cycle, Lent is the season of preparation for Easter, which is the season of celebrating the resurrection of Christ. This cycle concludes with Pentecost. After each of these two cycles is a season called Ordinary Time.

Looking at a calendar, the church year would be structured like this: it begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, in late November or early December. This is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent stretches across four Sundays, inviting us to mindfully prepare and joyfully wait for Christmas.

Christmas begins on December 25, when we celebrate the birth of Christ, and lasts twelve days. On January 6, we celebrate Epiphany – the coming of the Magi and Christ’s manifestation to all people. Following Epiphany is a short season of Ordinary Time that lasts until Ash Wednesday.

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, the six-week season of fasting and penitence that precedes Easter. Easter is the fifty-day season – outside of Ordinary Time, the longest season of the church year – of celebrating Christ’s resurrection and triumph over sin and death. On the fiftieth day after Easter we celebrate Pentecost, rejoicing in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the Church.

Following Pentecost is the second season of Ordinary Time, which corresponds to the second half of the church year and focuses on living out the Christ-life (through which we have just journeyed) in the midst of our daily lives.



Embracing this way of marking the year has formed my faith and my character, in large part, because I am repeatedly thrust back into the life of Jesus through the stories told and retold each season. These stories place Christ daily before my eyes and point me back to the One whom I am all too prone to forget in the busyness and bustle of my life.

Because each season has a special emphasis, I have opportunities to focus on specific areas of spiritual growth as I live out that season. In Advent, for instance, the focus is on waiting – joyfully and expectantly. In this season, I can practice patience and self-control, perhaps by waiting until Christmas to eat a favorite holiday treat or listen to a favorite carol. I learn again about hope, as I look forward with trust that Jesus is coming even when all around me seems dark.

The focus of the Christmas season is on incarnation – the incarnation of Christ in the person of Jesus, but also the incarnation of Christ in the heart and life of every believer. In this season, then, I seek union with God; just as Jesus was one with the Father, so I too can be one with Christ. I try to practice continuous prayer as a way of being united with Christ, so that he might truly become incarnate in me. (I find the ancient Jesus prayer – “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me” – deeply meaningful and helpful as I attempt to pray without ceasing.)

The focus of Epiphany is on God’s glory made manifest to all peoples. On this day and in the weeks that follow, I can learn to practice hospitality, welcoming others – my family, my friends, and, yes, sometimes even strangers – in the name of Jesus. I can also practice following Jesus outside of the realm of the familiar, like the Magi did. For me, this usually comes in the form of creating new, more godly habits of relating to the people around me, especially my young children – habits like biting my tongue (sometimes literally) when I

am frustrated, or really listening to others when they speak, instead of only half-attending and letting my thoughts wander. Often, I find these new habits also make me a more hospitable person, able to see beyond myself and my own thoughts and emotions and to focus on the people around me.

During Lent the focus is on repentance—turning away from the sin that clouds our vision and encrusts our hearts and turning toward God who alone can redeem and transform us. I can learn patience in this season, too, by

The church year pushes me back to Christ, to the stories of his life and to the rites—especially the Eucharist—by which his disciples re-enact and enter into his life through worship. The church year is necessarily communal.

fasting from food or an activity. Fasting creates space in my life for God, so this season is also a time when I learn again to discern the still, small voice of God as he speaks to my heart and mind. Sometimes that voice speaks words of conviction, calling me to repent of some habit of thought, word, or deed. Sometimes, God's voice speaks words of comfort, reminding me how deeply and wholly I

am loved, regardless of what I do or don't do. Either way, listening to God's voice helps me to see myself more clearly and draws me deeper into relationship with Christ.

During Easter the focus is on resurrection—the triumph of Christ over sin and death. Throughout this season, I learn to rejoice (which does not come easily or naturally to me!) and to see beyond present darkness to the promise of new life. This season calls me to live a resurrection life: daily to die to sin and live the new life God has graciously given in Christ. This year, on Good Friday, my husband and I found out that our unexpected pregnancy was a two-fer: we are having twins, which is the last thing either of us expected. Though I cried the first few nights, I soon began to laugh—a lot—at the ludicrousness of the situation. Embracing laughter is my daily exercise in living the resurrection: as my old expectations of what my life would look like died, God raised up in me a spirit of laughter, like Sarah of old, to help prepare me for and carry me through what will be a difficult and exhausting season of life. I am not yet convinced that laughter is born of joy—more like desperation—but the lightness of heart all this laughter has engendered in me is a gift only possible because of the Easter reality in which we live—a reality that affirms that in Christ, nothing is lost, nothing is wasted; God will use it all to accomplish his good ends.

On Pentecost the focus is on God's Spirit—a Spirit of power and might who inhabits and empowers the people of God. On this day and in the

weeks and months that follow, I can incorporate all the disciplines I embraced earlier in the year, seeking to allow them to create space for God to work in and through me, transforming me into the likeness of Christ.

I have found that when I faithfully enter into each season and practice disciplines that open me to the spiritual truth and reality to which that season points, gradually, over the course of many years, I am becoming more like Jesus.



And this is why I order my life by the Church's marking of time. The church year continually pushes me back to Christ, to the stories of his life and to the rites—especially the Eucharist—by which we, his disciples, re-enact and enter into his life.

Since story and symbol are two of the primary means by which the church year points us to Christ, then the locus of the church year is Sunday, the day when the worshipping community gathers to hear the Word and partake of the sacrament of Communion.

The church year is therefore necessarily communal. Though some practices—continuous prayer, for instance—are individual in nature, to fully enter into the church year, and the life of Christ which is its heart, requires the community of believers gathered together in worship. This communal dimension of the church year is one of its most formative aspects. We live in a culture that is driven by individual needs, desires, and fears. Living the church year in community with other disciples of Jesus forms us as the people of God, the Body of Christ, as one part of a much larger whole. To be formed in community means our individual needs can be met by the community, our desires can be transformed by the vision of a larger purpose, and our fears can be assuaged by the assurance that we are not alone.

By returning week after week to the gathered community in corporate worship, we allow the community itself to form us. We are not the center; Christ is the center—the head and the heart; we are the body, bound to one another by our mutual sharing in the life of Christ in Scripture and sacrament. The church year deepens this community by calling us, both individually and collectively, year in and year out, to re-live and live out the life of Christ, to be formed in the likeness of Christ, to become the body of Christ incarnate in the world.



The church year is not a magic formula. It is a tool, yet another discipline, that I practice so I might become more like Christ.

Living the seasons of the church year is not always easy, especially during Advent and Christmas when our culture's siren song of consumption is particularly loud. It is, again, a discipline. Something I practice over and over because it forms me in the ways I want to be formed: into a faithful follower of Jesus, attentive to his presence in my life and the lives of the people around

me, even the life of the world, and willing to respond faithfully to whatever piece of his work and his Word that he places before me.

Such formation does not occur quickly, but accrues over time. It is only in looking back at the past fifteen years and seeing how much I have grown in my relationship with Christ, in my sense of who I am in him, who he has called me to be, and the work he has called me to do, that I am able to see how deeply the practice of the church year has affected me.

Like any spiritual discipline, living the church year is most meaningful, most formative, and most *transformative* when we keep at it, embracing its seasons and their rhythms, allowing the life of Jesus to speak again and again into our own lives, seeking always to follow in the way Jesus leads us, year after year.

NOTE

† For more sustained reflection on each season of the church year, see Kimberlee Conway Ireton, *The Circle of Seasons: Meeting God in the Church Year* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

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What Are We Waiting For?

BY CLAUDE F. MARIOTTINI

**Through images of the mountain of the Lord's house,
the peaceful kingdom, the desert highway, and the child
Immanuel, the prophet Isaiah describes the coming of
the new son of David and establishment of God's reign.
The use of Isaiah's oracles in the Advent liturgy help
Christians prepare their hearts for the advent of Christ.**

Of all the prophets of the Old Testament, none has influenced the Christian understanding of the life and ministry of Christ more than Isaiah. The writers of the New Testament and the early Christians used Isaiah's oracles to shed light on the birth of Christ, his character and person, his ministry, and his suffering and death.¹

Many passages from the book of Isaiah have become firmly established in Christian imagination to form a basic understanding of the gospel message. Isaiah proclaims the coming of one who will call the people to prepare the way of the Lord (Isaiah 40:3). He describes the mission of one who will proclaim the good news to the poor (61:1). He proclaims the coming of a kingdom where people will forge their swords into plowshares (2:4), where the wolf will dwell with the lamb (11:6). Isaiah also speaks of the suffering of the Servant who will be despised and rejected by many (53:3), but through whom the will of the Lord will prosper (53:10).

During the Advent season, Isaiah speaks again and his oracles about the promised Savior give a clear indication that Advent had its origin in the hopes and hearts of people longing for God. As people of faith meditate on Isaiah's words and his vision of the Messianic age, they will realize that Advent finds its completion when it reaches the hearts of those who are waiting for God's coming in the person of his Son.

Isaiah speaks about the "mountain of the LORD's house" (2:1-5), the peaceful kingdom (11:1-10), the desert highway that is a "Holy Way" (35:1-10), and

the child whose name is Immanuel, "God with us" (7:10-16). Isaiah's words describe the coming of the new son of David and the establishment of the reign of God. The use of Isaiah's oracles in the Advent liturgy helps Christians prepare their hearts for the advent of Christ.

THE MOUNTAIN OF THE LORD'S HOUSE (ISAIAH 2:1-5)

This oracle begins with a holy place and an assembly of many people. The reason Isaiah's message has a great appeal as part of the Advent liturgy is because Isaiah is "a prophet who sees God's salvation affecting all nations and people."²

Isaiah's message is for the "days to come," the time when the Lord will come to establish his kingdom. With the end of the monarchy in Judah, the prophetic vision became the hope for the coming of the Messiah.

In Isaiah's vision of the future, the mountain of the Lord's house will be established as the highest of the mountains. It will become a conspicuous place from which the word of the Lord, his Torah, will go forth to the nations and attract people wanting to receive instruction from the Lord. By comparing the pilgrimage of the nations to the flow of a mighty river, the prophet implies that multitudes will come to Jerusalem to learn God's word.³

The words of Isaiah reflect a desire to turn to the true God and embrace his teachings. Desire to seek God's house and be taught God's word reflects people's dissatisfaction with their way of life and their eagerness to obtain the kind of spiritual insight that comes through knowing the true God.

When nations come to know God, they will allow God to arbitrate their differences and, as a result, peace will be established. The nations will crush their swords and transform these implements of war into tools of peaceful living. Isaiah saw that when God's kingdom is established, there will be an end to wars; nations will stop their contentions and establish peace.

Isaiah's statement that a nation shall not lift up a sword against another nation is a remarkable vision of universal peace—a peace only possible in the kingdom of the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). In the Prince of Peace's rule "there shall be endless peace" (9:7).

Isaiah's vision has not yet been fully realized, but a time will come when God's peace will prevail: "My peace I give to you" (John 14:27). Until then, the house of Jacob and the people of the Messiah are urged to walk in the light of the Lord (Isaiah 2:5).

This is the reason Christians must be "ready to proclaim the gospel of peace" (Ephesians 6:15). For, when people are taught God's words, they come to understand the evils of war and the benefits of universal peace. When people obey God's teaching, the living of the gospel will produce peace among the nations and in the hearts of people.

Isaiah's vision presents an alternative view of reality, a time and a place in which wars cease and violence gives place to peaceful resolution of conflicts. The season of Advent challenges us to live and proclaim this vision. Jesus'

gospel of peace is the means by which this alternative to war and violence can become a reality in the world where the church lives and does its work.

Through the proclamation of the hope that Advent brings to the world, God will bring together all estranged nations, separated by wars and strife, and establish a kingdom of peace and justice among the nations. What Isaiah saw as God's will for the future can become a vision that changes things in the present.

God's people must not walk in the nations' errors but in the light God provides for them in his word. It is in God's word that people learn what they must do and how they must live. Through the message of Advent, God encourages and empowers the Church to proclaim and practice peacemaking in our society and around the world: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9).

THE PEACEFUL KINGDOM (ISAIAH 11:1-10)

This prophecy of Isaiah begins with a fallen tree. The tree represents the monarchy established by David which lasted until the deportation of the royal family in 587 BC. The fact that it is fallen represents the divine judgment that came upon the house of David. Yet, the same prophecy speaks of a shoot coming out of Jesse's stump—and it is here that we observe the power of hope. The prophet proclaims that God will bring hope into the hearts of people who suffered the horrors of war and lived many years in the agony of hopelessness and despair. The shoot that comes out of the fallen tree represents the restoration of the house of David, a sign indicating that the house of David will survive and accomplish God's purpose in the world.

The coming of the ideal Israelite king is an announcement of what God will do in the future. Isaiah's oracle promises hope to a people in despair. The Kingdom of Judah's humiliation when the son of David, the king ruling in Jerusalem, was taken into exile will be transformed into exaltation when the new son of David makes his appearance in the manger of Bethlehem. The new son of David will emerge from the fallen tree and establish a kingdom of peace and righteousness.

Through the message of Advent, God encourages and empowers the Church to proclaim and practice peacemaking in our society and around the world.

In preparation for his work, the king will be endowed with a sevenfold gift of the Spirit of the Lord. The Spirit's anointing will allow the new king to rule in righteousness and restore peace to all creation.⁴ Due to the reign of this Messianic king, peace will prevail. Peaceful coexistence between humans

and the animal world will be restored as it existed in Edenic times. This renovation of creation will be made possible because the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord “as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:9).

The future king will establish justice and righteousness. This was God’s and the people’s expectation of all Israelite kings:

For he delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper.

He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.

From oppression and violence he redeems their life;
and precious is their blood in his sight.

Psalm 72:12-14

As a judge, the king will make decisions without compromising justice. He will not judge by what his eyes see or decide by what his ears hear. As a just king, he will judge the cause of the poor and will decide with equity for those who are in need.

The shoot that grows up from the stump of Jesse will become a banner to the nations, a sign drawing people together for a common cause. All nations shall come to him looking for guidance. The New Testament appropriates Isaiah’s imagery to relate his message to the life and ministry of Christ. The writer of Matthew understood the branch (Hebrew *nēcer*) to be a reference to Jesus Christ as the Nazarene (Matthew 2:23).

Advent is a time of change. When Isaiah announced the advent of David’s son, creation changed. The advent of Jesus Christ also brings change. Isaiah’s vision challenges Christians to embody the actions of this son of David, whom Christians identify with Christ. Christ’s ministry showed his love and compassion for the poor and the needy.

During the Advent season we must again realize that Isaiah’s vision for the Messiah has not yet become a reality. Advent challenges the Church to accept God’s call to minister to a world in need and challenges Christians to become the bearers of good news to the poor and the marginalized of society.

Isaiah’s oracle provides many challenges to Christians during this season of Advent. First, it calls Christians to believe that God can bring new hope to seemingly hopeless situations. If a shoot can sprout out of a fallen tree, God can bring hope out of despair. Second, God can bring peace and harmony to a world in conflict. If God can make wolves live together with lambs, he can also eliminate the enmity that exists between nations and transform old enemies into friends. This process of reconciliation can only happen when people live in the power of God’s Spirit, because it is the Spirit who endows people with the wisdom and understanding necessary to exercise restraint in their dealings with one another.

According to Isaiah's oracle, the judgment of God's people is overturned by the promise of a new beginning. The new shoot will emerge from the fallen stump of Jesse; a remnant will be redeemed and purified. God will be faithful to his promise to David that his throne will be established forever (2 Samuel 7:16).

During Advent we affirm once again that in Christ, God's purposes will be fulfilled through a people he chose for himself — a people who will live the gospel message before the nations of the earth. In the end, people will lift their voices and proclaim together with the people of Jerusalem, "Hosanna to the Son of David" (Matthew 21:9).

THE DESERT HIGHWAY (ISAIAH 35:1-10)

This oracle is the continuation of a theme developed in Chapter 34, which announced God's judgment on Judah. Chapter 35 announces the restoration of God's people, their return to Zion, and the renewal of the land through which they will travel back to Jerusalem. Isaiah's message deals with God's advent to redeem his people from their exile in Babylon. God's coming means the renewal of creation. Because of God's work, the wilderness will rejoice and the desert will blossom.

In his oracle, Isaiah announces that the coming of God will be accompanied by a complete transformation of the desert through which the people must travel to return home and by a change in the physical and spiritual life of the people. Isaiah begins by describing God's rehabilitation of the land. The land was an arid wilderness. Such a description serves to emphasize that the desert was a wasteland, barren and desolate. However, the barren and desolate land will blossom when it receives water. Then, that which was dead will come back to life; that which languished will be restored. The same care God shows for his creation, he will also demonstrate to his people. To the people who said: "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely" (Ezekiel 37:11), God will come to provide hope, health, and a new life.

The news of God's coming was good news for those hopeless because of their exile in a foreign land. The oracle tells that God is the one who will heal their physical disabilities (cf. Psalm 103:3). Blind eyes will be opened, deaf ears will hear again, those unable to walk will leap like a deer, those unable to speak will sing for joy.

Advent challenges the Church to accept God's call to minister to a world in need and challenges Christians to become the bearers of good news to the poor and the marginalized of society.

Isaiah announces that God has prepared a highway in the wilderness, which the people returning from exile will travel on their way back to Zion. God's people will walk on this desert highway, which is called "the Holy Way" or "The Way of Holiness."⁵ The name is important because this highway is the work of the Holy One of Israel and the way the redeemed people will travel. Because of this, the highway has limited access; only those redeemed by God may travel on it.⁶

Many people enter the season facing economic difficulties, physical limitations, and scarred relationships. Advent calls us to trust in God's power to renew and bring wholeness to our broken lives.

The highway in the desert is Isaiah's favorite image to describe the return of the children of Israel from exile.⁷ On this special road, prepared for the ones whom God redeemed and purified, the people will journey back to Zion and none shall go astray. Those who have not been redeemed by God will be barred from this highway

in the desert, along with the unclean and those animals that can harm God's people. God's people will travel without fear because God will be with them. The return of God's people to their native land will be a glorious occasion, with singing, joy, and much celebration.

The people of God returning from their exile will experience the joy of deliverance and rejoice in what God has done for them. In the same way, there was great joy in the coming of the Son of God. The message to the shepherds was a message of joy: "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11). This good news of great joy empowers the Church in its mission to transform society.

In his oracle, Isaiah announces that God is preparing a highway in the desert for his people. When God comes to do his work, both the land and the people will experience God's healing and restoration. In the fullness of time a voice cried: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Isaiah 40:3; cf. Luke 3:4 and parallels). And when Christ came, he also transformed lives. Because of his coming, the blind received their sight, the lame walked, the lepers were cleansed, the deaf heard, the dead were raised, and the poor received good news (Luke 7:21-22).

The message of Isaiah is that the coming of God to redeem his people will bring life and vitality to the world and make a difference in the lives of those who live with spiritual and physical limitations. This is the same message the coming of Christ brings in the Advent season. Many people enter

the season facing economic difficulties, physical limitations, and relationships scarred beyond their control. The coming of Christ announces that in him we find both physical and spiritual restoration. The Son of God has entered human history, taking upon himself our humanity, that he might be “able to help those who are being tested” (Hebrews 2:17-18). In the Advent season, we are called to trust in God’s power to renew and bring wholeness to our broken lives.

THE CHILD IMMANUEL (ISAIAH 7:10-16)

Isaiah’s oracle about the birth of the child Immanuel must be understood within the historical context of the prophetic announcement. The announcement of the birth of a child representing God’s presence was made at a time of great crisis for the people of Judah.

Isaiah’s oracle was given to Ahaz, king of Judah. It assured the king and his nobles of God’s help and protection at a time when Jerusalem was under attack. The conflict known as the Syro-Ephraimite war took place when Pekah, king of Israel, and Rezin king of Syria tried to force Ahaz into joining an alliance against Assyria.

When Ahaz was preparing for war, God sent Isaiah to reassure the king that God would protect Judah from the threat they were facing. The message Isaiah was to deliver to Ahaz was that the invasion would not happen (Isaiah 7:7). Isaiah warned Ahaz that unless he believed in God’s promise and stood firm in his faith, he would not stand at all (7:9).

Ahaz refused to believe Isaiah’s message. God sent Isaiah a second time to Ahaz, and again the king refused to hear the words of the prophet. Then the Lord gave a sign to Ahaz that foretold the exile of Israel and Damascus. The sign is described in verse 14: “Therefore the LORD himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.”

A few months after Isaiah spoke these words, Assyria deported a large section of the population of Israel and Damascus to other parts of the Assyrian Empire. The deaths of Pekah and Rezin were the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy. As Isaiah had predicted, the invasion did not take place and the threat to Jerusalem was eliminated.

At the time Isaiah gave the sign to Ahaz, the child born to the unnamed young woman might have been King Hezekiah, Isaiah’s son, or another child born soon after the oracle was proclaimed. But, the gospel of Matthew interprets the birth of the child Immanuel as a reference to the birth of Christ. This eschatological interpretation of Isaiah’s prophecy is based on the conviction of the early Christians that in Christ God is actually present with his people.

The name Immanuel means “God with us.” Whether God was with the people of Judah for judgment or for salvation is debatable. In the context of Isaiah’s promise to Ahaz, the prophecy of the child Immanuel was an assurance to the king that God would be present with his people to deliver them.

In the child Immanuel, God was present in the hopes and faith of the people. Although God's presence was spiritual, in the hearts of the people, it was nonetheless real.

The presence of Immanuel is the great hope that Advent brings to humanity. In the child of Bethlehem, God entered human history and was present with humanity: "and the Word was God.... And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:1, 14). In the child born in Bethlehem God made himself known to his people. This time, however, his presence was physical, which allowed people to know that, through the child of Bethlehem, God was reconciling the world unto himself.

The statement "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19) reflects the early church's faith that Isaiah's prophecy stating God would be present with his people had been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. What God promised to Ahaz and the people of Judah became a reality with the birth of Christ. When Matthew identified Jesus with the child Immanuel, he was expressing the faith of Jesus' followers, the same faith Christians celebrate in the Advent season.

During Advent, Christians are called to radical faith. In the midst of all the uncertainties of life, when we are confronted with the paroxysms of war and violence, faith and trust in God is the anchor that holds our lives and helps us to stand firm and not fall. When life's situations seem hopeless and we are besieged from every side, we must remember that we are not alone, "for God is with us" (Isaiah 8:10).

CONCLUSION

The oracles of Isaiah were spoken a long time ago to a people who needed hope and encouragement. His oracles proclaimed the coming of God to redeem his people and to establish a peaceful kingdom. During Advent, Christians must reflect on the time when conflict among nations will cease, the peaceful kingdom a descendant of David will establish, the way we must walk daily, and the One who is God with us.

Isaiah's oracles spoke to the situation of God's people and described his vision for a future brought by God. Advent speaks to Christians about the present and the future. The presence of God in Christ is the reality that gives meaning to our present. The expectation of his coming prepares us for the day when the future Christ promised will become a reality.

Isaiah's message proclaims a future filled with hope. His message has deep implications for God's people today. The hope Isaiah proclaims points us to a sacred place, to a fallen tree, to a highway in the desert, and to the birth of a child. Isaiah's message directs our faith to a future in which justice will prevail, in which creation will be restored, and universal peace will be established. Advent heightens this hope and impels us to journey together with Immanuel on this Holy Way, a journey that will culminate with the establishment of God's kingdom.

NOTES

- 1 Drew Christiansen, SJ, "Liturgy and the Political Isaiah," *America* (December 3, 2007), 28.
 - 2 Christopher R. Seitz, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 40.
 - 3 Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 30.
 - 4 Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1997), 171.
 - 5 Alec J. Motyer, *Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 219.
 - 6 David McKenna, *Isaiah 1-39* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1993), 331.
 - 7 *Ibid.*, 330.
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The Three Advents

BY FR. JAMES CONNER, OCSO

For Bernard of Clairvaux and his modern interpreter, Thomas Merton, the season of Advent is a “sacrament” of the presence of God in his world, in the mystery of Christ at work through his Church, preparing in a hidden, obscure way for the final manifestation of his kingdom.

All too often, Advent is seen simply as a preparation for Christmas and the birth of Christ. However, the Liturgy and the Fathers of the Church see it in a much broader scope. For them, Advent is the beginning of the liturgical year, and this in turn is our way of entering into the great mystery of Christ in the world: “God has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Ephesians 1:9-10, RSV).¹

This plan is envisaged not as a future prospect but as a present fact. The kingdom of God is thus already present and realized in a hidden manner. But the mystery can only be known by those who enter into it, who find their place in the mystical Body of Christ, the Church, and therefore find the mystery of Christ realized and fulfilled in themselves.

Just as the Gospels convey to us the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the Acts of the Apostles show us that same life of Christ now continued in and through the life of the Church, so the liturgical year brings us the life of Christ from his birth at Christmas to his death, resurrection, and bestowal of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and continues for the remaining weeks of the year to show us the life of the faithful in and through that gift of the Holy Spirit.

Advent is seen as the introduction to this whole mystery. St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) sees it as the “sacrament” of the presence of God in his world, in the mystery of Christ at work through his Church, preparing in a hidden, obscure way for the final manifestation of his kingdom.²

Thomas Merton (1915-1968) developed the thought of Bernard in his book *Seasons of Celebration*.³ Merton tells us that the twelfth century Cistercians placed a special emphasis on the coming of Christ by his Holy Spirit to the Christian person. They contemplate his hidden birth in our lives, his advent here and now in the mystery of prayer and providence. "This is the special presence of God in the world that fascinates them and draws them to Him in meditation upon the Bible, where He is present in His Word and in the light generated by that Word in the heart of the Believer."⁴

THE "SACRAMENT OF ADVENT"

Merton says that those who pay no attention to the coming of the Savior fail to admit that they need a Savior. They feel self-sufficient. But in this they abide in a state of illusion. One will recognize their need for a Savior only to the extent that they face their own inner sense of emptiness, aware of their dependence on God, living as "little ones," the children of the Church. God comes to us hidden in the "Sacrament of Advent."

Bernard shows the danger of seeing Advent merely as a preparation for Christmas. It runs the risk of keeping us centered on our present reality in the flesh, failing to recognize the call that God's plan reveals—the call for our inner transformation into Christ. He warns:

...the remembrance of this condescension is turned into pretext for the flesh. During those days you may see them preparing splendid clothes and special foods with utmost care—as if Christ at his birth would be seeking these and other such things and would be more worthily welcomed where they are more elaborately offered! Listen to [Christ] as he says... "Why do you so ambitiously prepare clothes for my birthday? Far from embracing pride, I detest it. Why do you so assiduously store up quantities of food for this season? Far from accepting pleasures of the flesh, I condemn them. As you celebrate my coming, you honor me with your lips, but your heart is far from me.... Unhappy is the person who worships pleasure of the body and the emptiness of worldly glory; but happy the people whose God is the Lord."⁵

God comes among us precisely in order to bring us salvation. But we are slow to recognize our true and profound need. Bernard tells us that Adam and Eve tried to steal what belongs to the Son of God. Satan told them that they would "be like God" (Genesis 3:5). We have all sinned in Adam and Eve and have received a sentence of condemnation. To this the Son responds,

"Therefore, so that they may know that I love the Father, let those whom he seems somehow to have lost on my account be restored to him through me....

"They all envied me. I am coming and I am showing myself to be such that anyone who chooses to be envious, who aches to imitate me, may do so, and this emulation may become a good thing."⁶

Humanity had been overthrown by malice from without, so love from without can benefit them.

Bernard points out that it would seem more fitting that we go to Christ. We were the ones in need. But he says that there was a twofold obstacle.

Our eyes were darkened, yet he dwells in light inaccessible; and lying paralyzed on our mats we could not reach the divine height. That is why our most gracious Savior and Healer of souls both descended from his lofty height and dimmed his brilliance for our weak eyes.⁷

Bernard says that there are three reasons for our misery and helplessness: we are easily deceived in our judgments of good and evil; we are weak in our attempt to do good; and we are slow in resisting evil. The presence of Christ in us overcomes these obstacles. By faith he dwells in our hearts and shows us how to judge between good and evil. By fortitude he strengthens our weakness, so that we can do all things in him. And finally, he resists evil within us. "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31, NIV).⁸ The secret is to abandon ourselves to Christ, the power of God, and then he will deliver us from forces that we could not resist by ourselves. "Divine mercy is most evident," Merton observes, "in the tenderness with which the infinite God tempers the strength of His light to the weakness of our eyes and becomes a Man like the rest of us."⁹

We do not have to travel far to find Christ. He is within us. Paul has already told us "Do not say who will scale heaven for us? (as if we had to bring Christ down to earth)" (Romans 10:6, Knox).¹⁰ This is the mystery of Advent: God's descent to our lowliness out of pure love, not for any merit of our own. Conversion, then, is more a coming of God to us than of our turning to God. Through charity, the Holy Spirit works in our hearts "with a power that reaches your innermost being" (Ephesians 3:16, Knox). The final effect is to transform us entirely in God. Bernard says: "If you wish to meet God, go as far as your own heart."¹¹

To find the Word in our heart we must enter into ourselves not so much by introspection as by compunction. We must go to meet the transforming action of the Holy Spirit within our souls. This spiritual encounter is an advent in which God comes to our inmost self and we find ourselves in him. Bernard conceives this as liberation, a breaking from the prison of "selfhood." It is liberation from the miserable preoccupation with our own being. It is the coming of God into our being, from which we have previously gone out.

O humankind, you need not sail across the seas or pierce the clouds or cross the Alps! No grand way is being shown to you. Run to your own self to meet your God! *The Word is near you, on your lips and in your heart!* [Romans 10:8] Run to compunction of heart and confession of lips to escape at least the dunghill of a wretched conscience, for there the author of purity cannot appropriately enter.¹²

Merton says that it is easy for God to come to us because he comes to us in mercy, not in justice.

He comes as a physician to heal the wounds of sin. He comes as a little one lest we be terrified.... [H]is Advent is less a *coming* than a *manifestation* of His presence.... It is not that He comes Who was absent, but He appears Who was hidden.¹³

THE THREE ADVENTS

Bernard speaks of three Advents. "We know His threefold coming: *to* humankind, *into* humankind and *against* humankind. *To* all He comes without distinction, but not so *into* all or *against* all."¹⁴ The first is that in which God comes to seek and save that which was lost. The second is that Advent by which Christ is present in our souls now. This is taking place at every moment of our life. Christ is passing by and we are judged by our awareness of his passing. The third Advent is when he comes to take us to himself at the end of time. Meditation on the mystery of the first and third Advents will be made fruitful by works of charity and will lead to our complete transformation in Christ.

Meditation on the first Advent gives us hope of the promise offered. The remembrance of the third reminds us to fear lest by our fault we fail to receive the fulfillment of that promise. However, if we face this third mystery of Advent with humility and sincerity of heart, we have nothing to fear. Bernard, echoing the Apostle Paul's promise in 1 Corinthians 11:31, writes:

"If we judge ourselves, we shall not be judged."¹⁵ The second Advent is set in between these two terms. It is necessarily a time of anguish, a time of conflict between fear and joy: fear lest we fail to recognize the coming of the Lord at every moment and joy at recognizing his presence and his call to us in love. But in this second Advent, God comes to us and works mysteriously

within us in spirit and in truth in order that the fruit of his work may be made manifest in the third Advent when he comes in glory and majesty.

"Evidently, the work of Christ in us as 'Lord of virtues' is to produce in us His own virtues, to transform us into Himself as we contemplate Him in the Mystery of Advent, imitating His humble, hidden and sacrificial life," Merton writes. "First of all, then, we must unite ourselves with His truth by

To find the Word in our heart we must enter into ourselves not so much by introspection as by compunction. This spiritual encounter is an Advent, in which God comes to our inmost self and we find ourselves in him.

our *humility*.... The first thing God asks of us is to judge ourselves, to recognize our nothingness, to keep ourselves convinced that we can do nothing without Him and that therefore must receive all from Him."¹⁶

Paul reminds us: "What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" (1 Corinthians 4:7). Just as Jesus Christ was conscious that he received all from the Father,

"In this way, keep God's Word," Bernard of Clairvaux counsels. "Let it enter into the bowels of your soul. Let it pass into your feelings and into your routines."

so the heart of his disciple must be conformed to the humiliation of his heart. That is why he told us: "Learn from me; for I am gentle and humble of heart" (Matthew 11:29). Because of our fallen state, because of our sinfulness, the heart is deeply ambivalent. The heart is the place where we are brought face to face with

the power of evil and sin within us. Yet the heart is also the place where we encounter God. It is the locus of divine indwelling, as Paul says: "God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Galatians 4:6).

The heart is both the center of the human person and the point of meeting between the human and God. It is both the place of self-knowledge, where we see ourselves as we truly are, and the place of self-transcendence, where we understand our nature as a temple of the Holy Spirit. It is here that the mystery of Advent is realized. It is here that life and prayer become one. And it is here that we discover our profound oneness with all the rest of creation.

Bernard sums up the three Advents by noting that in the first Advent, Christ "was seen on earth and lived among human beings," who either accepted or rejected him. But in the third Advent "*all flesh will see the salvation of our God* [Isaiah 40:5]." We live in a moment between those two Advents that is an opportunity to welcome Christ, the Word of God. Bernard explains,

The intermediate coming is a kind of path by which we travel from the first to the final. In the first Christ was our redemption. In the final he shall appear as our life. In this one...he is our rest and consolation.

...*Anyone who loves me will keep my words, and my Father will love him, and we shall come to him* [John 14:23].... Where then are [God's words] to be kept? Doubtless, in the heart.... Is it enough to keep them in the memory alone? The Apostle will tell anyone who keeps them in this way that *knowledge puffs up* [1 Corinthians 8:1]. Then, too, forgetfulness easily wipes out memory.

...In this way, keep God's Word: *Blessed are those who [hear the word of God] and keep it [Luke 11:28].* Let it enter into the bowels of your soul. Let it pass into your feelings and into your routines....

If you keep God's word like this, you will surely be kept by him.¹⁷

When we keep the Word of God, God himself dwells in us. To eat the Word of God is first to absorb it into the depths of our own being by obedient and loving faith; then to let the power of the Word (the Holy Spirit) express itself in our works of love and good habits. It is this divine action within us, enlightening us to receive him in his revealed Word, which is the heart of the "sacrament of Advent."

If we fully and actively receive this Word of God into our heart and life, then we have nothing to fear from the third Advent of the Lord. He himself has told us this in Matthew 25:31-40: "Whatever you did to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me." All three Advents are dependent on him who comes: first as a little child and a Man like us in all things but sin; then as the hidden One coming within our hearts but also in every person we encounter and every event of our life; and finally in the glorious Lord, for "God has put all things in subjection under his feet.... And when that subjection is complete, then the Son himself will become subject to the power which made all things his subjects, so that God may be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:27-28, Knox).

Paul tells us that "the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved" (Romans 8:22-24, NIV).

In this way we see that Advent is much more than simply a preparation for Christmas or even an introduction to the liturgical year. The mystery of Advent is the mystery of God coming to us at every moment. As the poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) says: "He comes, comes, ever comes."¹⁸ Our God comes to us to claim us as his own in order that we might fully share in his own divine life, and in this way to realize the purpose of our creation.

NOTES

1 Scripture passages marked RSV are from Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1952 [2nd edition, 1971] by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

2 Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons for Advent and Christmas Season*, Cistercian Fathers Series 51, translated by Irene Edmonds, Wendy Mary Beckett, and Conrad Greenia OCSO (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2007).

3 Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration: Meditations on the Cycle of Liturgical Feasts* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), 61-88.

4 *Ibid.*, 61.

5 Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon Three: "On the Seven Pillars," paragraph 2, in *Sermons*, 20-21.

6 Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon One: "On the Six Aspects of Advent," paragraph 4, in *Sermons*, 6-7.

7 Ibid., paragraph 8, in *Sermons*, 9.

8 Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

9 Merton, 68.

10 Scripture quotations marked (Knox) are taken from *The Holy Bible: A Translation from the Latin Vulgate in the Light of the Hebrew and Greek Originals*, translated by Ronald A. Knox (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1956).

11 This is Merton's translation from Bernard's Sermon One, paragraph 10, in *Seasons of Celebration*, 70.

12 Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon One, paragraph 10, in *Sermons*, 11.

13 Merton, 71. The last line is my translation from Latin of Bernard's teaching quoted by Merton.

14 Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon Three, paragraph 4, in *Sermons*, 22.

15 Ibid., paragraph 7, in *Sermons*, 25.

16 Merton, 78-79.

17 Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 5: "On the Intermediate Coming and the Threefold Renewal," paragraphs 1-3, in *Sermons*, 33-34.

18 *A Tagore Reader*, edited by Amiya Chakravarty (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1966), 302.



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Advent of the Heart: The Prison Meditations of Alfred Delp, SJ

BY JENNY HOWELL

Condemned to die in a Nazi prison, Father Alfred Delp discovered that Advent is the time for being deeply shaken—the time not only to remember the birth of the Christ Child, but to participate in this unfolding and ultimate revelation of God that began in the Holy Night.

I first encountered the work of Father Alfred Delp while enjoying the hospitality of the Christ in the Desert Monastery, where a group of Benedictine monks devote their lives to prayer, worship, and manual labor in the wild conditions of the Chama Canyon in New Mexico. Sitting at a heavy wooden desk in my simple room, I listened to the silence that is an essential component of the monks' way of life. The monastery, remote and removed, provided a startling silence broken only by the wind moving through the canyon, the twitter of the lark, and the haunting, mournful cries of a distant pack of coyotes.

Before the heat of the day overtook my brain, I read Father Delp's Advent meditations. While imprisoned in a Gestapo prison cell, awaiting his trial and inevitable execution, Delp wrote these meditations on slips of paper that he smuggled out to his Munich congregation with his dirty laundry. His hands were bound in chains, but he was able to wriggle one hand free enough to write. Delp's prison meditations are a penetrating account of the gutted society he lived in, where because of disordered lives—lives not properly ordered toward the God in whose image we are made—humankind was losing its very humanity. He believed Advent was the event through which order could be properly restored. This was his great hope.

A VOICE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS

Spanning an entire wall in the refectory of Christ in the Desert Monastery is a beautiful painting of saints gathered at a feast table. In one corner of the painting, literally pasted on at a later date, stands the figure of John the Baptist. Before the monks sit down to break bread at the midday meal, they turn to John's image and sing a song of thanksgiving for his voice that cried out in the wilderness. Clothed in camel hair, eating sparsely of insects and honey in the ravages of harsh heat, John cried out, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Matthew 3:3). For his unwavering admonitions, he was ultimately imprisoned and executed. For the monks at Christ in the Desert Monastery, John the Baptist serves as an icon of their own vocation in the wilderness.

Like the monks, Father Delp also turned to John the Baptist's example as he faced his own wilderness. For him, John was the personification of Advent. In his prison meditations, he returned again and again to John's life as an example of authentic and faithful living for his own chaotic and confusing generation. Outside his jail cell, the Third Reich launched their last futile offensive in the Ardennes. Defeat was certain for Hitler, though the Nazis refused to acknowledge this. Delp had long resisted the epic myth of the new Germany. In 1943, with the permission of his Religious Superior, Delp met with members of the Kreissau Circle – an anti-Nazi gathering of like-minded individuals who sought to envision and plan for a post-Nazi German society built on Christian virtues and practices. This was why Delp was imprisoned. To participate in such conversations was to deny the myth of Nazism – and this was high treason.

The heat of the desert or the chill of a jail cell are hardly the first images that come to mind when we think of Advent. But perhaps they should be. The cries to prepare for the coming of the Lord rise from the depths of solitude and speak to us, reminding us of what is real and what is true. For Delp, in Nazi Germany, the truth seemed but a faint and distant flicker of light.

Father Delp was overcome by the tragedy of the concentration camps, the executions of Christian leaders who publicly prayed for their Jewish brothers and sisters, and the condemnation of those who dared to criticize Hitler. What was most horrifying to him was not only that these crimes were possible, or that the crimes were committed, but that those involved could do what they did without being shocked or surprised. It was the tragedy of what Delp called the "mass-men" – those with a dehumanized bureaucratic consciousness who could practice the greatest of evil with ritual as if it were somehow noble and intelligent, not seeing the absurdity, the horror, or sin of their actions.

The hope that Delp held onto was that humanity could turn away from this collective self-deception and once again find its way to the Advent Road. "These are not matters that can be postponed to suit our convenience," Delp writes. "They call for immediate action because untruth is both danger-

ous and destructive. It has already rent our souls, destroyed our people, laid waste our land and cities; it has already caused our generation to bleed to death."¹

In his introduction to Father Delp's prison writings, Thomas Merton observes, "In these pages we meet a stern, recurrent foreboding that the 'voice in the wilderness' is growing fainter and fainter, and that it will soon not be heard at all. The world may sink into godless despair."² In this dire context Father Delp sees the season of Advent as the time for being deeply shaken, a time for humanity to wake up from the disembodied stupor it had been swallowed up into. Advent is the time not only to remember the birth of the Christ Child, but to participate in this unfolding and ultimate revelation of God that began in the Holy Night.

"We run the risk of concealing Christmas behind bourgeois customs and sentimentality, behind all those traditions that make this holiday dear and precious to us," Delp warns. "Yet perhaps the deep meaning is still hiding behind all those things. What this celebration is about is the founding of a final order for the world, a new center of meaning for all existence. We are not celebrating some children's holiday, but rather the fact that God has spoken His ultimate Word to the world. Christ is the ultimate Word of God to the world."³

ADVENT OF THE HEART

Throughout his sermons and meditations, Father Delp urged his congregation to be mindful of their present situation with a stark realism. It was a lie to say that the reality surrounding them was not as terrible as it seemed.

Father Delp encouraged them to turn and face the shocking destructiveness with courage, and acknowledge the truthful implications of untruth in society.

The temptation to live outside of or to escape the reality that surrounds us is very real. But Delp reminds us that history itself is the means of existence and the locus of God's self-revelation:

"Trying to live outside history

is lifelessness and a shadow existence. History is not *the* ultimate thing, but the Ultimate can be seen *only* in the context of history. Otherwise, life revolves around an idol that deceives; an idol with which we deceive ourselves and seek cheap consolation."⁴

Just as John the Baptist confessed "I am not he" to those followers who hoped he was the Savior of Israel (Acts 13:25), so we too must confess that

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we are not God, with the utmost of clarity and honesty. This is the beginning point for what Father Delp describes as “the Advent of the heart.” The road of Advent shapes us into being more human. To seek God, to be caught up in the life of God, is humanity’s innermost purpose. The confession that we ourselves are not God is a first step to becoming who we truly are.

Service to others cannot be separated from the worship and praise of God. In worshipping God, we become clear-sighted and honest, with a selflessness that moves us toward a greater openness to God’s gifts in the world.

For Delp, Advent is the beginning of a quiet reflection on the self. Silence can be healing. The one who tries to evade solitude and confrontation with the unknown God may eventually be destroyed by the meaninglessness of mass society. But before that occurs, it is still possible to discover mysterious sources of hope and strength. We must have a willingness to step down

from the pedestals we are quick to raise for ourselves, from the vanity and self-grandeur with which we deceive ourselves. With this modesty comes the knowledge of boundaries, the knowledge of our true capabilities and potential. Rather than being restrictive, this knowledge brings forth a transformation of being, a conversion that generates deep freedom to live a life full of joy and possibility. Delp describes this as a “density of life”: life brimming with a joy that opens us to encounter the life of God.⁵

THE DREAMS WE DREAM

When we reclaim once again who we truly are, we begin to dream dreams. This is one of the first forms of resistance to becoming part of the unthinking mass social order. Some of these dreams are authentic creative dreams, visions that call us out of our tired, enslaved pace of habit. God’s call to us is always regenerative and creative. Dreams can increase the very reality within us that is called upon, precisely because of their realness. They expand our horizon, drawing us closer into the life of God. But, Delp warns, there are also false dreams—dreams that obscure reality and our own limits. These dreams do not extend our boundaries, but instead cause us to overstep them—a move that Delp warns can be deadly.

To help us discern whether the dreams we are experiencing are authentic impulses from God or foolish dreams, John the Baptist serves once again as the example. As Father Delp reflects, John the Baptist’s life personified “service and annunciation”: the voice crying in the wilderness came from a man who did not inflate his own importance, but rather pointed the way to the true Messiah.⁶

Service cannot be separated from the act of annunciation – the worship and praise of God. In the act of worshipping God, we become clear-sighted and honest. Intrinsic to this clear-sightedness and honesty is a selflessness that increases our openness to God’s gifts in the world. This was an Advent discovery that surprised Father Delp as he paced his prison cell in chains. Even in the midst of fear and doom, God’s messengers were present to him. “In the darkness of fear and death, the seeds of light were being sown.”⁷ In this openness, we find our truest freedom: a freedom from delusion, self-deterioration, and the cramping of the soul. This freedom leads us to a transcendence that is part of our very essence, a transcendence that allows us to move beyond our own finitude into an encounter with God.

The act of worship is crucial to our vocational call to service. For indeed, as Delp saw first-hand, some acts of service – when mildly and mundanely enacted, extracted from the authentic worship of God – can prove deadly. In the days after his own trial, he described the men present in the courtroom when his guilty verdict was released.

[They] were a bunch of ordinary, dutiful individuals who had put on their Sunday suits very ceremoniously for the occasion and took themselves very seriously indeed, sitting there in judgment.... They were good biddable SS men, obediently fulfilling the role of “the people” – which is to say “yes.”

...[T]heir faces are good-natured, average faces, very accustomed to this sort of thing, the average type representing “the” Germany.⁸

From the silence of his prison cell, Father Delp saw clearly that his own despairing and terrifying imprisonment was a metaphor for the imprisoning depravity and despair that ruled the entire social order.

You need to have sat in a small room with your hands in irons and have seen the shredded flag of freedom standing in the corner, in a thousand images of melancholy. The heart flees from these images again and again, and the mind strives to lift itself free, only to awaken even more sharply to reality at the next guard’s footsteps sounding in the hall and the next clanking of keys. Then you know that you are powerless. You have no key, and your door has no inner keyhole, and your window is barred and set so high that you cannot even look out. If no one comes and releases you, you will remain bound and poor in misery. All the mental struggles do not help at all. This is a fact, a condition that exists and must be acknowledged.⁹

In his imprisonment, Delp realized the true state of humanity – poor, damaged, and incapable of managing life. “We sit,” he writes, “in musty bomb cellars and cramped prisons and groan under the bursting and destructive blows of fate.”¹⁰ He urged his congregation to quit giving a false glamour to

the myths that surrounded them, and to begin instead to bear it for what it is—an unredeemed life. True life is only possible through an intervention by God, who breaks open our prison, cancels our debt, and brings a blessing. Once this is done, the jangling of chains and the trembling of nerves and the faintness of heart transform themselves into a cry for refreshment from God. Once concrete reality is connected with the truth, then our lungs once again

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breathe in fresh air, our senses are reordered, the horizon again holds promise for us. Even in the mournful melodies of longing, there is joy for that which can and will come.

Once safely distanced from the calculation, mechanization, and organization of the “mass-men,” a wholesome and higher level of freedom is attained. Father

Delp reminds his congregation that true freedom is not merely the ability to make one choice rather than another. Freedom is not the ability to rebel. Rather, true freedom is an encounter with God. Our means of contributing to our own freedom are through the simple acts of honest humility, a readiness to serve, and the praise of God. This is the way of the Advent Road. The perspective we gain as we travel down this road provides a clearer vision of what lies ahead: the distress does not die, but the worry does; the burden does not disappear, but the faintheartedness does. When a person finally centers her life on an appropriate relationship with God, it is at this point that she truly begins to be. And in the consummation of this true life, long-lost or atrophied capabilities begin to grow. The eyes become brighter and keener. Even in times of shaking or quaking, certainty rises. The soul once again knows song, and with joy in the Lord, can once again sing “Alleluia!” “The voice of such a person,” Delp writes, “is not so quickly silenced.”¹¹

GLIMPSES OF GRACE

The light and truth that Father Delp describes are not only found in a lone individual. His vision is not for himself alone. What he is writing about is a renewal of the entire social order. “Moments of grace,” he writes, “both historical and personal are inevitably linked with an awakening and restoration of genuine order and truth.”¹² The road toward God leads us to become totally engaged in the historical task of the Body of Christ for the redemption of humanity and the world.

Reflecting on this journey, Father Delp notes that even partial vision is sufficient for radiant happiness. This is the great mystery of life with God.

In spite of our own blurred vision and seeming incapacity for God, God is still with us; life with God is still possible. This is, in fact, our only hope. Yet the partial vision is only the beginning—the first breath. The “ever-greater” and “always-still-more” of eternity is shimmering through the cracks of creation and keeps life in a dynamic state. On the Advent Road, life moves toward the far horizon, expanding in its joyful content. “The promises of God stand above us, more valid than the stars and more effective than the sun. Based on these promises, we will become healthy and free, from the center of our being. The promises have turned us around and, at once, opened life out into the infinite.”¹³

He wonders: can joy be found here on earth? Of course! Joy can be experienced in the blooming of flowers, in a meeting with a true friend, in the sun, or the movement of water. There are joyful emotions that mean we are capable of truly loving and truly suffering. The earth, as well as heaven, can be a great occasion for joy. “I know perfectly well the many sources from which joy can flow out to man—and that all these sources can also fall silent.” That kind of joy is not what Father Delp sought to write about. Rather, “It’s about that old theme of my life: man becomes healthy through the order of God and in nearness to God. That is also where he becomes capable of joy and happiness. Establishing the order of God, and announcing God’s nearness, and teaching it and bringing it to others: that is what my life means and wants, and what it is sworn to and abides by.”¹⁴

When Father Delp finally received his condemnation to death, he was surprised by his own surprise. Of course the outcome was inevitable, he mused, but how difficult to accept when his very nerves “tingled with life.” He did not embrace death passively. “To be quite honest I don’t want to die, particularly now that I feel I could do more important work and deliver a new message about values that I have only just discovered and understood. But it has turned out otherwise.”¹⁵ One thing was gradually becoming clear: Father Delp knew he must surrender himself completely. “This is seed-time, not harvest. God sows the seed and some time or other he will do the reaping. The only thing I must do is to make sure the seed falls on fertile ground,” he writes. “May others at some future time find it possible to have a better and happier life because we died in this hour of trial.”¹⁶

Even in the last bits of writing he was able to smuggle out of his jail cell, Father Delp sustained a hope that transcended his own life. His hope rested on the belief that Christians would still be able to hear the Advent voice crying from the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord!”

NOTES

1 Alfred Delp, SJ, *Prison Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004; reprint of New York: Herder and Herder, 1973), 23.

2 Thomas Merton, “Introduction,” *Prison Writings*, xxvii.

3 Alfred Delp, SJ, *Advent of the Heart: Seasonal Sermons and Prison Writings 1941-1944* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 135.

4 *Ibid.*, 144.

5 *Ibid.*, 108.

6 *Ibid.*, 109.

7 This is Thomas Merton's summary in "Introduction," *Prison Writings*, xxxiv.

8 *Prison Writings*, 156.

9 *Advent of the Heart*, 112-113.

10 *Ibid.*, 114.

11 *Ibid.*, 115.

12 *Prison Writings*, 24.

13 *Advent of the Heart*, 117.

14 *Ibid.*

15 *Prison Writings*, 160-161.

16 *Ibid.*, 160.



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The Advent Fast

BY THOMAS TURNER

As we recover and creatively appropriate the tradition of fasting during Advent, we identify with and proclaim God's narrative of love in a counter-cultural way. We resist the instant gratification, materialism, and gluttony that increasingly characterize cultural holiday celebrations.

The earliest celebrations of Advent, from the fourth century, involved some form of fasting. The season of Advent is a sacred moment in the journey of the Church through the liturgical year; marking this time with fasting is entirely appropriate, for as Scot McKnight observes, fasting is "a person's whole-body, natural response to life's sacred moments."¹

As the season of spiritual preparation for Christ's coming, Advent began as a time to get ready for the great feasts to come — the Christmas celebration of Jesus' birth that follows it in the church year, and the heavenly banquet that Christ promised. In this way Advent is a counterpart to Lent, the season when Christians fast in preparation for the feast of Easter. Because Advent falls during the tenth month ("December" in Latin means the tenth month), the early Christians connected it to the subscribed time of fasting during the tenth month in the Jewish tradition (Zechariah 8:19). The Advent fast is carried on to this day by Eastern Orthodox traditions.²

In many congregations in the West, however, Advent has become almost synonymous with the celebration of Christmas; rather than a time of preparation, it is more like a "little-Christmas." It is no longer a prelude to a holy banquet, but a foretaste — like lavish appetizers — of a grand secular meal. Lost is any sense of getting ready for the coming of the Lord, a preparation that should be equal to the Lenten preparation for Christ's death and resurrection. Instead, the seasons of Advent and Christmas have become perpetual feasts not only on food but on material goods as well.

This trend in churches has been greatly influenced by the secular holiday season running from Thanksgiving to New Year's Day — a festival of overeating

and gadget purchasing. Kicking off with gluttonous bingeing on turkey and all the trimmings followed by queuing at retail stores for the purchase of electronics and clothing at severely reduced prices, this mass-marketed celebration of material wealth is characterized as much by “holiday weight gain” and credit card debt as by nostalgia and gift giving. Seasonal commercials lure us to purchase for ourselves expensive cars wrapped in red ribbons and to satisfy the voracious appetites of our children with the most expensive and exotic presents.

Too often we have modeled our Advent and Christmas celebrations on this secular festival of material wealth and pleasure. This can only disorient us from the true meaning of these seasons. The wisdom of the Church is simple: the gravity of Christ’s Incarnation beckons us to feast and rejoice, but only after a period of preparation that includes fasting. Just as a wedding feast requires the bride and groom and their families to devote months of sacrificial effort to carefully planning and preparing for the celebration, so we are called to prepare ourselves for the joy of Christ’s coming through a time of sacrificial fasting.

Fortunately, many congregations are making renewed efforts to mark the season of Advent in ways that are grounded in the Christian tradition. They have an increased interest in liturgy and liturgical traditions. They are creating organizations like Advent Conspiracy to rethink our involvement in secular holiday celebrations.

Fasting is one of the historic Advent traditions these congregations are recovering and creatively appropriating. Fasting helps us proclaim God’s story—a narrative of love that requires watchful preparation of our hearts and minds, and patient waiting for God’s faithful completion of divine promises—in a counter-cultural way. While the surrounding culture is being consumed by a perpetual feast beginning at Thanksgiving, we can present the gospel by returning to the Advent fast. As we will see below, this can be a prophetic, redemptive rejection of the personal instant gratification, materialism, and gluttony exhibited in cultural holiday celebrations.

REJECTING PERSONAL INSTANT GRATIFICATION

Advent is a corporate pilgrimage to encounter Christ—in his birth and his second coming. When the Apostle Paul describes the disciples being “caught up in the clouds...to meet the Lord in the air” when Christ returns (1 Thessalonians 4:17), he is thinking it will be like going on a pilgrimage with fellow citizens to greet a royal delegation outside the city and to journey back home with the noble person. In our Advent preparation for Christ’s birth and hopeful anticipation of his glorious return, we go with fellow disciples to welcome our coming king.

Israel’s yearning through the centuries for the coming of the Messiah is a model for our corporate pilgrimage to encounter Christ during Advent. The Gospel of Luke highlights two remarkable instances of Israel’s patient

longing: Simeon and Anna traveled to the Temple to await “the Lord’s Messiah” who would be “the consolation of Israel” (Luke 2:25-26). When Mary and Joseph arrive at the Temple to present Jesus for his dedication, Simeon praises God for the “salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples” (2:30-31). Likewise the prophetess Anna, who “worshiped there [in the Temple] with fasting and prayer night and day” in preparation for Christ, “began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (2:37-38). During Advent we learn to journey with righteous men and women like these who joined together to hope for God’s redemption of Israel and to prepare themselves for Christ’s coming.

Note that fasting from food was an important part of Anna’s preparation and hopeful waiting for Christ. Fasting pulls us into the drama of God’s cosmic liturgy and away from instant gratification. “In the face of strong messages from our culture that say we should satisfy every desire as soon as we feel it, fasting teaches us something counter-cultural and deeply significant for our life of faith,” Lynne Baab notes.³ Our desire to be instantly gratified leads us to skip the hardship of preparation and hopeful waiting and have our Christmas feast now, which is like eating all the chocolates from an Advent calendar at once. Fasting teaches us to push back against this desire through setting aside something important in our lives and filling that sacrificed time with reflection and prayer – orienting our bodies and souls toward dependency on God.

However we practice an Advent fast within a Christian community – whether we cut back on food or material possessions, and however much and often – we pause our busy grasping in a concrete way in order to welcome our reliance upon God and learn to give more of our life to God. Together with other disciples, we take a small step to greet the Christ who is graciously coming to us and (this is the mystery) has been drawing us to himself. The spiritual effects of fasting are like those of lighting the Advent wreath: we do not accomplish much on our own – consuming a bit less food or other stuff, or brightening the room just a bit more – but we open our hearts to God’s presence in the world.

REJECTING MATERIALISM

Eastern Orthodox Christians generally fast from meats, dairy, oil, and wine during Advent in order to identify with the simple fare that Adam and Eve shared before their sin. God had supplied their nutrition in the Garden of Eden without the consumption of animals (cf. Genesis 1:29 and 9:3). This fast also reminds them of the privilege they enjoy in consuming costly foods throughout the year. Since meat, dairy, oil, and alcohol are the most expensive items on our grocery lists, fasting from them is a reminder that God generously provides these items of great worth to us and they are much more than we need.

Using the Advent fast to open a window to the beginning not only resists personal over-consumption of expensive and unnecessary foods, but also measures our corporate over-consumption. God gave humankind “dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth” (Genesis 1:26b). The Advent fast can

“The aim of fasting is to make us conscious of our dependence upon God.” This insight can extend to our fasting from other good things that, improperly desired or carelessly used, can distort our relationship to God.

teach us how our culture, often with the willful participation of Christians, has twisted dominion over God’s world into careless exploitation of its limited resources. We forget how our material possessions grow from the fragile earth, are extracted out of dangerous mines, or depend on ever-shallower wells. (We would be wise to reflect on how much oil and heavy

metals go into the production and shipment of our Christmas gifts.) The cultural deception of endless supply meets stiff resistance with the Advent fast, as we are reminded that the only thing we have in endless supply is the love of Christ. Everything else, including all we consume, will run out if we are not careful.

“The primary aim of fasting,” Bishop Kallistos Ware observes, “is to make us conscious of our dependence upon God.”⁴ This insight can extend to fasting from other good things that, when we improperly desire or carelessly use them, can distort our relationship to God. In our culture, that would certainly include our material possessions. Thus, fasting from possessions during Advent would allow us to step back from what most threatens to control us – the deluge of advertising, hype of the latest technological gadgetry, and incessant hustle and bustle of shopping – in order to reclaim the season as a time of spiritual attunement and discipleship.

We would notice how even our gift giving, which has a proper and wonderful role in the Christmas celebration, can become distorted by the culture’s consumerist mantra of “more is better.” We purchase new things we do not need and we upgrade older things that are perfectly usable. Happiness, we are told, is buying the latest iPhone model or dining on an expensive gourmet entrée. We measure the gifts we give and receive not by the joy of relationship they express and bring about, but by their price tags and luxury. The mantra tempts us to consume in order to find delight, but an Advent fast reminds us that our delight is found only in the coming king and the furthering of his kingdom.

A hopeful sign of resistance by Christians to this holiday consumerism is the Advent Conspiracy movement, started in 2006 to “make Christmas a revolutionary event by encouraging their faith communities to Worship Fully, Spend Less, Give More and Love All.”⁵ When Cornerstone Christian Church in Wyckoff, NJ—located in an affluent part of the New York City metro area—joined the “conspiracy” in 2009, each member purchased one less gift and donated the money they saved toward building a well, medical center, and community center in Gulu, Uganda. The success of Advent Conspiracy has helped the church build a year-round partnership with a ministry in Uganda. Cornerstone’s experience illustrates what a modest Advent fast from material possessions can do.

REJECTING GLUTTONY

Traditionally, the Advent fast focused on abstaining from certain foods for a period as a physical and spiritual act that nourishes prayer. By fasting during this season we also can bear witness to the gluttony which is in our society generally, but especially on display during holiday celebrations.

While most of us are wasting an exorbitant amount of food, many people in our society suffer from hunger or food insecurity. The facts are shocking. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that twenty-seven percent of all food in America is going to waste.⁶ Meanwhile the organization Feeding America provided food to one in eight Americans in 2009, an increase of forty-six percent since 2006.⁷ Further, our eating habits are woefully careless: only Washington, DC, and Colorado have obesity rates under twenty percent.⁸

Fasting during Advent can be a counter-cultural witness that we will fight hunger, resist waste, and eat mindfully so that those who are less fortunate can partake of the bounty of healthy food that is available. This was one of its earliest functions: in “On the Fast of the Tenth Month,” Pope Leo the Great (d. 461) reminded parishioners that the Advent fast was instituted so that “when all the ingathering of the crops was complete, we might dedicate to God our reasonable service of abstinence, and each might remember so to use his abundance as to be more abstinent in himself and more open-handed towards the poor.”⁹ Using the food or other resources that we do not consume to help the poor makes the Advent fast a communal and missional act, one that takes seriously God’s charge:

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke...?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry...?

Isaiah 58:6a, 7a

The point is not to flaunt the abundance of our own lives, but to become more fully engaged in the continuing story of God’s redemption of the world

through Christ by working to correct the imbalance of hunger and poverty. The Advent fast calls us to join with all God's people in hopeful waiting for the Lord and to stand in solidarity with them by resisting the unjust patterns of this world.

NOTES

1 Scot McKnight, *Fasting, The Ancient Practices* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009), xiv.

2 The Eastern Orthodox tradition usually refers to the fasting season from November 15 to December 24 as the Nativity Fast (as a time of preparation to celebrate Christ's birth) or St. Philip's Fast (since the season begins after that saint's feast day on November 14). For more information, see the page on fasting at the Orthodox Church in America's Web site, www.oca.org/OCFasting.asp.

3 Lynne M. Baab, *Fasting: Spiritual Freedom beyond Our Appetites* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 45.

4 Kallistos Ware, "The Meaning of the Great Fast," an introduction to *The Lenten Triodion: The Service Books of the Orthodox Church*, translated by Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), 13-68, here citing 16.

5 Larry Parsley describes the Advent Conspiracy movement in "The Advent Invitation" on pp. 79-82 of this issue. For more information, see www.adventconspiracy.org.

6 Linda Scott Kantor, Kathryn Lipton, Alden Manchester, and Victor Oliveira, *Estimating and Addressing America's Food Losses* (Washington, DC: United States Department of Agriculture, 1997), 2; available online at www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/FoodReview/Jan1997/Jan97a.pdf (accessed August 28, 2010).

7 James Mabli, Rhoda Cohen, Frank Potter, and Zhanyun Zhao, *Feeding America* (Chicago, IL: Feeding America, 2010), 1; available online at <http://feedingamerica.org/faces-of-hunger/hunger-in-america-2010/hunger-report-2010.aspx> (accessed August 28, 2010).

8 "U.S. Obesity Trends" (Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010); available online at www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/trends.html#State (accessed August 28, 2010).

9 Leo the Great, "Sermon XVI: On the Fast of the Tenth Month," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, II, 12, edited by Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1984), 124. Available online at www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf212 (accessed August 28, 2010).



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Distinctive Traditions of Advent

BY AMBER AND JOHN INSCORE ESSICK

Lighting the candles on an Advent wreath, celebrating St. Lucia's Day, and decorating a Jesse Tree can help us faithfully narrate and prepare for the arrival of the Christ. These practices turn our hearts away from the commercialism of the season and toward stillness and reflection.

In the days and weeks leading up to Christmas we are inundated with all manner of preparatory activities—attending sundry gatherings and performances, stressing over gift and shopping lists, decorating homes, and travelling to visit family and friends. We become exhausted and lose Christmas before it ever arrives.

Yet beyond “all the bustle you’ll hear”¹ during November and December, the Christian season of Advent directs God’s people toward stillness, reflection, and expectation. Advent, with its own distinctive traditions, is a rich time in the liturgical year that can counterbalance the pre-Christmas flood of consumerism and frantic activity. Congregations and families can welcome the new liturgical year by means of an Advent wreath, celebrating St. Lucia’s Day, and decorating a Jesse Tree. These historic practices enable God’s people to faithfully narrate and prepare for the arrival of the Christ. They signal that Christmas is properly understood and celebrated in light of Advent and in advance of Epiphany.

WREATHING ADVENT

Fashioning a wreath with candles to mark the progression of time is not unique to Christianity, yet these candled wreaths are probably the most popular of all Advent traditions. There is no single method of constructing or utilizing an Advent wreath, though the most common ingredients include

an arrangement of greenery, a series of candles, and weekly lections.

Advent wreaths typically consist of fresh or artificial greenery with four candles inserted equidistant around the wreath. Some Advent wreaths have a fifth candle in the center, the Christ Candle, which is lit on Christmas Eve. Originally white candles were used, but in time violet candles were substituted to match the liturgical color of Advent and the penitential focus

Reclaiming Advent requires that we come to terms with the fact that many festivities we enjoy during Advent are better suited for the season of Christmas.

of the season. More recently, as Advent has been distinguished from the penitential season of Lent, blue has become the liturgical color of choice for many wreath arrangements.

Selecting colors for the candles is less important than allowing their light to guide our journey through

the season. When it is difficult to recognize the divine at work around us, the lighting of an additional candle each week signals ever so subtly the imminent arrival of the Light of the World. This progression illustrates that God's redemptive activity operates less like a roaring wildfire and more like a series of small, steady flames.

Sometimes Advent themes or virtues are associated with the candles — for instance, they might signify faith, hope, love, and joy — in order to foster important connections between the wreath and other liturgical acts of praying, singing, preaching, and reading Scripture. It is worth noting, however, that there is no single set of symbolic associations in Church tradition. We should be cautious not to overburden each candle with arbitrary meanings. The simple act of lighting a candle in conjunction with an Advent lection is a rich and sacred practice.

In many congregations the lighting of the candles each week is accompanied by public reading of the Advent lections. These moments provide opportunities for families and children to participate in the liturgy. Though the lections rotate among the Gospels in the Revised Common Lectionary's three year cycle, they retain the same foci for the four Sundays of Advent: Jesus teaching about the final judgment, John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness, John the Baptist in different settings pointing to the one who is to follow, and Mary preparing to give birth to the long-awaited promised one.² The readings begin with Jesus' eschatological teaching; not until the fourth Sunday of Advent is the Christ child mentioned. The Advent wreath and corresponding lections habituate God's people in hope, expectation, and patience as they await both the arrival of the child and God's future reign.

While the Advent wreath is a liturgical staple for many congregations, celebrating and marking Advent time with a wreath can also be a meaningful familial practice. Our family constructs an Advent wreath each year out of fresh greenery from a local greenhouse and places it in our living room. We light the appropriate number of candles for meals, gatherings, and times of prayer. The presence of the wreath in our living space is a helpful reminder that we are in the season of Advent. The flickering flames are a serene backdrop for the lections and silence Advent invites. During a time when congregations and families are tempted by rush and hurry, the wreathing of Advent is a worthy tradition that encourages patience and stillness.

ST. LUCIA'S DAY: LIGHT SHINES IN THE DARKNESS

Another distinctive tradition of Advent that is attentive to the coming Light is the celebration of St. Lucia's Day on December 13. Lucia (or Lucy), whose name derives from the Latin root for "light," was martyred during the reign of the Roman Emperor Diocletian around the year 303.³ For centuries the longest night of the year fell on December 13, and so it became customary to mark the occasion with a festival of light.⁴ Lucia's triumph over the darkness is reenacted each year when a young girl, representing Lucia, dons a white dress and a crown of glowing candles, to deliver coffee and buns to all in attendance. Variations on the practice include "Lucia" leading a procession in which each processant carries a single candle.

Squeezing another event into our busy December schedules might seem difficult, but reclaiming Advent requires that we come to terms with the fact that many of the festivities we enjoy during Advent are better suited for the season of Christmas. The observance of St. Lucia's Day might be organized in lieu of a Christmas pageant or celebrated on the Sunday nearest December 13. As with the Advent wreath, St. Lucia's Day is well-suited for the home and can easily involve the entire family. When celebrated in conjunction with the Advent wreath, the theme of a growing light surfaces yet again. Consider drawing attention to the increasing hours of darkness and our great need of light. Lucia's story provides ample material for discussions of virtues such as faith, hope, courage, and charity. St. Lucia's Day is a distinctive tradition of Advent worthy of our consideration, for we are too often blind to the light that "shines in the darkness" (John 1:5a).

THE JESSE TREE: TRACING GOD'S PATH

In addition to lighting the Advent wreath and celebrating St. Lucia's Day, making and decorating a Jesse Tree is a daily ritual of Advent by which God's people trace the narrative of salvation. The Jesse Tree derives from Isaiah 11:1, "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots," and from the accounts of Jesus' lineage in Matthew and Luke. Medieval artists depicted a sleeping Jesse, the father of King David, with a shoot emerging from his side, with Israel's kings and

prophets forming the branches that connect Jesse to Mary and Jesus.

The Jesse Tree is a wonderful tool for telling the history of God's redemptive work from creation, through the people of Israel and the birth of Christ, and on to Jesus' final reign. The story unfolds through short daily readings as ornaments representing each reading are hung on a tree.

Of all the practices of Advent discussed here, the Jesse Tree requires the

The Jesse Tree is a wonderful tool for telling the history of God's redemptive work from creation, through the people of Israel and the birth of Christ, and on to Jesus' final reign.

most preparation. In addition to constructing a two- or three-dimensional "tree," you should make an ornament for each day of Advent. Because Advent begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, and Christmas can fall on any day of the week, the number of required readings

and ornaments will vary from year to year. The Jesse Tree could be as ornate as a quilted banner or carved wooden tree, or as simple as a homemade poster or bare branch in a plant pot. Likewise, the ornaments for the tree could be hand-stitched on felt or drawn on paper by the children. Typically the images on the ornaments are simple, such as an apple to represent humanity's fall or a white lily to represent Mary. The simplicity of a homemade tree and ornaments makes the Jesse Tree particularly suitable for children.

The annual rehearsal of the salvation narrative is formative for children. From an early age, children who attend church inevitably begin to form their "canon within the canon" of Scripture based on the Bible stories taught most often in Sunday school or presented in Bible story books. Listening to and discussing a series of Bible stories during Advent will help children identify recurring themes of redemption in each story, and in time, hopefully enable them to understand the Incarnation in light of the greater salvation narrative.

Adults also benefit from rehearsing the gospel narrative by using a Jesse Tree. We typically gather news and information in sound bites and headlines, and seldom does any bit of it hold our attention for more than a few minutes. We are conditioned to guard our time jealously. This sense of hurried half-attention is exacerbated during the November and December holiday rush. As we gather each day to participate in the ritual of readings and decorations, we learn that not only the story of our faith, but also the manner in which it is told, are counter-cultural. We learn that the best stories take time to unfold and are worth retelling. Instead of participating in the daily grind of news segments and the seasonal pull toward shopping and gift-giving, God's people become storytellers. We slow down to reflect on the good news of God.

The Jesse Tree may lead us to deeper insights regarding God's call of Abraham (Genesis 12:1-7) when we read it along with the call of the young boy Samuel (1 Samuel 3:1-21), or the account of the exodus from Egypt when it is juxtaposed to the prophets' warning of the coming Babylonian exile. Phrases like "All people on the earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3) and "Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:17) still ring in our ears as we reflect on God's purposes in the Incarnation. We find both continuity and novelty in Christ's coming as an infant, bringing divine light to the world. Through the practice of decorating the Jesse Tree and reflecting daily on the spiritual heritage of God's people, we come to understand better our own place in the story by tracing God's path.

Given the complexity of the Jesse Tree practice, a few practical suggestions are in order. First, *think ahead*. Several reputable websites and books describe a Jesse Tree, sell handmade ornaments, and provide daily readings. Though the Internet makes information on the Jesse Tree easy to find, the suggested lections for each day may need to be condensed or abbreviated to keep the celebrants from being overwhelmed by lengthy readings. Making the tree and ornaments before Advent begins is also advisable.

Be realistic. If you or your family are not in the habit of regular devotions or readings, gathering for the daily ritual of the Jesse Tree may initially feel unnatural. Therefore, we suggest you simplify the custom as much as possible for your first year. Telling the story in your own words to children is recommended since it may be more difficult to find a children's Bible with all the suggested lections included. If you do not have children, it may be that reading a few short verses of the story each night and hanging the ornament is all you need. Start simple and let your ritual grow over the years.

Finally, *be creative*. This pertains both to the method of decoration and the stories you choose to tell. Whatever material you use for your tree and ornaments, it should be appropriate for the group using it. Children may enjoy making the ornaments themselves, in which case imperfections should be allowed. Including new stories each year may be more difficult, but as you celebrate year after year, you may find yourself wanting to include lesser known stories of God's redemption that are important to you. You might be drawn, for example, to passages featuring God's use of women and children in redemption—such as the midwives' cunning in the Exodus or the boy who offered Jesus his lunch to feed the crowd. You might end up creating a two- or three-year cycle of stories, demonstrating that the Jesse Tree has become of fixture of your family's Advent season.

CONCLUSION

As we begin to practice some of Advent's distinctive traditions, our hearts and minds turn away from a commercialized interpretation of the season and toward stillness and reflection. In lighting the Advent wreath,

we attend to the growing light and keep vigil for the coming savior. Celebrating St. Lucia's Day invites us to embrace and embody what she symbolizes: purity, generosity, and light. Using the Jesse Tree to tell the story of God's redemption encourages children and adults to develop the art of telling the gospel as narrative.

All Advent traditions involve hearing the ancient and future stories of salvation that prove formative for our understanding of the Incarnation. The continual and communal celebration of Advent over many years, however, yields the richest meaning for Christians. That we return annually to these stories and practices reflects both our need to hold them in our collective memory and the merits of habit in spiritual formation. Thus, in reclaiming Advent we rehearse our witness to the world as we prepare the way of the Lord.

SUGGESTED WEB RESOURCES

The Voice (www.crivoice.org), a wonderful online resource for all things liturgical, has helpful overviews of the Advent wreath (www.crivoice.org/cyadvent.html#Celebrating%20Advent) and the Jesse Tree (www.crivoice.org/jesse.html).

The website www.jesse-trees.com offers different sets of Jesse Tree ornaments, including a do-it-yourself cross-stitch kit. Parent and child devotionals, with questions for reflection and discussion, are available for each day of Advent.

Information on St. Lucia's Day is more limited, but these videos show how a St. Lucia's Day celebration might unfold in a church worship service (www.youtube.com/watch?v=948h_gHSzW0) or in the home (www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5tXLC1Fub8&feature=related).

NOTES

1 We borrow this apt description of contemporary Christmas busyness from Jay Livingston and Ray Evans's popular song "Silver Bells" (1950).

2 The Gospel lections in Year A are Matthew 24:36-44; 3:1-12; 11:2-11; and 1:18-25. In Year B they are Mark 13:24-37; 1:1-8; John 1:6-8, 19-28; and Luke 1:26-38. The Year C lections are Luke 21:25-36; 3:1-6; 3:7-18; and 1:39-45 (46-55).

3 Tradition holds that Lucia was born into a wealthy family in Syracuse, Italy, and raised as a Christian by her mother Eutychia. As a young woman, Lucia took a vow of celibacy. When her mother, who knew nothing of the vow, persuaded her daughter to accept the marriage offer of a suitable young man, Eutychia became quite ill. Not until she visited a holy site on Lucia's advice was she healed. Lucia promptly secured her dowry and gave it to the poor. The suitor, outraged by the sudden turn of events, informed the governor of Lucia's Christian faith. Lucia went before the court, gave witness to her faith, and was condemned to death. The intended instruments of her death, including ropes and flames, failed to harm her. Some accounts record that when her eyes were gouged out they miraculously reappeared. It was only after her throat was cut that Lucia died. She

has often been depicted holding a burning lamp or a plate with two eyes on it, the latter being the primary reason Lucia is the patron saint of the blind.

Her story is told in greater detail in Sabine Baring-Gould, *The Lives of the Saints*, volume 15 (Edinburgh, Scotland: John Grant, 1914), 168-170. This work is available online at www.archive.org/details/livesofsaints15bariiala (accessed August 10, 2010).

4 The winter solstice in the northern hemisphere, which is the shortest day and longest night of the year for people living north of the equator, fell on December 13 according to the unreformed Julian calendar. On our Gregorian calendar, it falls on December 21 or 22.



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**In THE DREAM OF SAINT JOSEPH, Georges de La Tour
portrays a peaceful Joseph, illuminated by the coming
light of the world.**

The Coming Light

BY HEIDI J. HORNIK

After recounting the genealogy of Jesus stretching from Abraham through King David to Joseph, “the husband of Mary,” the Gospel of Matthew introduces a problem. Joseph learns that Mary, before they have lived together, is with child. Being a good man who does not want to publicly humiliate his fiancée, Joseph decides to dismiss Mary secretly. Exhausted by making this difficult decision, Joseph falls asleep and an angel appears to him in a dream (Matthew 1:18-25).

In *The Dream of Saint Joseph*, the French Baroque artist Georges de La Tour depicts the moment when the angel comes to Joseph with a message from God.[†] The open book on Joseph’s lap signifies that he has turned to Scripture to find strength and guidance. The angel’s raised left hand with open palm toward heaven symbolizes the reception of God’s message, which now the angel passes to Joseph by touching his arm with the other hand. The presence of the candle, partially blocked by the angel’s arm, is a sign of Jesus as the coming light of the world. This single light source – a painting technique known as tenebrist light – reflects strongly off the face of the angel and illuminates Joseph, creating a sense of meditation and mystery. The message from God is: “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (1:20b-21). This marvelous event, Matthew notes, will fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy that “‘the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Emmanuel’ – which means ‘God with us’” (1:23).

Down-to-earth portrayals of Joseph like La Tour’s were very popular during the Catholic reform of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when Joseph became a representative figure of a supportive father. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) encouraged devotion to Joseph through her Carmelite Order, and Pope Gregory XV (1554-1623) dedicated a feast day to him on March 19, 1621.

NOTE

[†] For more information about the artist, see Philip Conisbee, ed., *Georges de la Tour and His World* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art/New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

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This masterpiece of Caravaggio's career, THE BEHEADING OF SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST, reminds us how John, like the Messiah whose coming he foretold, confronted unjust powers and principalities.

Confronting the Powers

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

John the Baptist was both a foreteller and forthteller of the kingdom of God. The coming of the Messiah, John foretold, would be a threat to the unjust principalities and powers of the world – especially to King Herod Antipas who ruled the regions of Galilee and Perea from 4 BC to AD 39. The king’s father, Herod the Great, was the ruler who ordered the massacre of innocent children in Bethlehem to prevent the Messiah’s birth, and his son had similar insecurities.

John, as a forthteller of the truth in the face of societal injustice, criticized Herod Antipas for being with his brother’s wife, Herodias. The king responded by imprisoning John (Matthew 14:3-4; Mark 6:17-18; Luke 3:19-20), which gave Herodias an opportunity to extract revenge against the prophet by luring Herod to kill John (Matthew 14:5-12; Mark 6:19-29).

John’s prophetic ministry intertwines with Jesus’ in remarkable ways: their births are foretold by angels, Jesus seeks baptism by John, their public ministries expose the injustices of society as they prepare people to welcome God’s kingdom, and they suffer violent deaths at the hands of governing officials. Indeed, when the perpetually paranoid Herod first hears of Jesus’ public ministry, he worriedly confides to his slaves, “This [Jesus] is John the Baptist; he has been raised from the dead” (Matthew 14:2; Mark 6:14). So, as we reflect during Advent on the import of Christ’s coming, we are reminded how he challenges the unjust powers and principalities.

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio’s *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* – considered the masterpiece of his career – depicts the prophet’s gruesome death.¹ The artist painted it during his final years, after he had fled from Rome to the island of Malta, by way of Spanish-controlled Naples, to escape the Pope’s jurisdiction. Caravaggio was a fugitive from justice, having murdered his former friend in a gang fight on May 28, 1606.² Ironically, Caravaggio’s works from this period of exile are some of his most religious.

Caravaggio was embraced by the Knights of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, Rhodes, and Malta, the sons of the great Catholic nobility in many lands who lived together in chivalric brotherhood and were subject directly to the Pope. The Knights, established in the eleventh century as Hospitallers for pilgrims in Jerusalem during the Crusades, had received the donation of the island of Malta by the Spanish Emperor Charles V in 1530. Caravaggio

strongly desired to become a Knight. Because he was a murderer, he had to request a waiver from the Pope, which quite remarkably he received in March 1608. This was a second chance for Caravaggio to live a life of honor, chivalry, and service. He was installed into the Order on July 14, 1608. It has been suggested that this work was given to the Order in lieu of a proper *pasaggio* – the gift, usually of money, that Knights presented to the Order upon their admission.³ It was intended as the altarpiece for the Oratory of San Giovanni Decollato that is annexed to the Knights’ conventual church of St. John in Valletta, Malta.

The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist is the only extant work that the artist signed: the letters “f. MichelAn...” are formed out of the blood spewing from the freshly cut neck of the Baptist.⁴ The painting, which is largest of Caravaggio’s works, dominated the Oratory space. The Caravaggio scholar David Stone explains, “Built in 1602-5 over the cemetery where knights, including those martyred by the Turks, were interred, the Oratory owes its origins to a petition from several knights who wanted to move their confraternity of the Misericordia to St. John’s.”⁵ This organization accompanied prisoners to the gallows. Although the Knights’ Oratory functioned to host elections, installation ceremonies, tribunals, and defrockings, it was also used for the training and devotions of the novices.

Caravaggio’s *Beheading* is set in an austere prison courtyard. At first glance, the dramatic story is told calmly on the left side of the composition. The body of John lies on the ground like a sacrificial lamb that has been slaughtered. The hairshirt, an iconic attribute of the saint, has its animal hooves placed near the Baptist’s head to reinforce that his martyrdom paves the way for Christ’s own sacrifice. The executioner has already used the sword to kill John and now uses the *misericorde*, a long narrow knife, to cleave the head from the body. The jailer points to the basket as if to get the deed over with as soon as possible. The girl – dressed in servant’s clothes and, therefore, probably not Salome – holds the uncovered basket. The only person to show compassion towards the event is the old woman, who has either accompanied the girl or is the prison nurse. Two prisoners in the low cell window watch a scene that they, like the Knights, have probably witnessed many times.

Caravaggio painted the event in John’s life that was most relevant to the work of the Confraternity of Misericordia: the slain saint represented the prisoners that the organization accompanied to their deaths by beheading. The sponsoring Order of the Knights of Malta, a highly religious group, also interpreted the event as foreshadowing the death of Christ.

The painting is a silent composition, a dead calm; although it does not shake awake its viewers, it requires close examination and evokes a response. This period of calm for Caravaggio ended abruptly when he committed a crime in Malta and was imprisoned. He fled Malta in late September 1608 and was defrocked *in absentia* by the Knights of Malta on December 1, 1608.⁶ In 1610, as a victim of mistaken identity, Caravaggio was falsely imprisoned

and his possessions seized in Rome. Released two days later, he contracted a fever and died soon afterwards, on July 18, as he made his way to Port'Ercole in the hope of finding his belongings. Caravaggio's death was the subject of morality plays by several authors that generated many prophet-like myths about the artist.

NOTES

1 Roberto Longhi, the great Italian scholar who brought attention to Caravaggio in 1951 with the pivotal exhibition in Milan, *Mostra di Caravaggio e dei caravaggeschi*, called *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* "the painting of the century."

2 David M. Stone, "'Fra Michelangelo' and the Art of Knighthood," in Keith Sciberras and David M. Stone, *Caravaggio: Art, Knighthood, and Malta* (Malta: Midsea Books, 2006), 92.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid. Because the signature, f[ra] Michelan[gelo], makes reference to Caravaggio's new status as a knight, the canvas must have been completed after Caravaggio's installation date. It is likely that it was unveiled on August 29, the feast of St. John's Decollation, the Oratory's titular.

5 Ibid., 93.

6 David M. Stone, "Light into Darkness," in *Caravaggio: Art, Knighthood, and Malta*, 14.



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Tosini emphasizes John the Baptist's innocence, determination, and strength—traits that served the young prophet well when he cried out in the wilderness for God's people to "prepare the way of the Lord."

Prepare the Way of the Lord

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

Reflection on John the Baptist plays a prominent role in preparing our minds and hearts for the coming of Christ during Advent. In the Gospel lectionary readings on the second and third Sundays in Advent we are reminded of John's message (Matthew 3:1-12; Mark 1:1-8; Luke 3:1-18; John 1:6-8, 19-28) and Jesus' praise for his faithful ministry (Matthew 11:2-11).

The Synoptic Gospels identify John the Baptist as the one whom the prophet Isaiah promised would come to announce the end of the Exile and the salvation of God's people:

He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.

Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

Luke 3:3-6 (cf. Matthew 3:3 and Mark 1:2-3)

John the Baptist is a critical figure throughout Christian history and culture, but he is nowhere more important than for the citizens of Florence, Italy, where he is the patron saint of their city. The artists of Florence turned to the Gospels of Matthew and Mark for a description of John's clothing—a shirt made from camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist—to establish his iconographic attributes of asceticism.

The Florentine painter Michele Tosini probably created his *Saint John the Baptist* to be displayed in a wealthy patron's palace or villa for private devotion. Tosini, working in the Mannerist style (between the High Renaissance and the Baroque), utilizes some of the scriptural iconography of Matthew and Mark. Around John's waist is his hairshirt; instead of a leather belt at his waist, a strap originating from one corner of the hairshirt is draped over his muscular chest and left shoulder.

The composition consists of John in half-length figure, with his left arm moving upward and left forefinger pointing on a diagonal almost parallel with the cruciform staff that he holds in his right hand. This manner of composition for John the Baptist, made popular in the beginning of the sixteenth century in paintings by Leonardo da Vinci (*Musée du Louvre*) and Andrea del Sarto (*Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts*), was firmly established in the visual tradition by the time Tosini was working.[†]

Tosini positions the head in three-quarter view with the right eye looking directly toward the viewer while the other eye wanders to the left. Tosini's Mannerist style can be found in the muscles modeled from the light and shade—a technique used by many artists including Tosini's friend, Michelangelo. The touch of John's right hand onto the very painterly and tactile hairshirt is soft and delicately posed. Viewers can imagine the feel of the hairshirt, the light touch of a finger on just small a piece of the material. John's hair is delicately painted, and the curls are lit almost as highlights in the front, drawing attention back to the eyes and elegant shape of the head and neck. These are also characteristics of Mannerist portrait style. John is made human and attractive in a familiar way as in the commissioned portrait of a family member.

Michele Tosini incorporated Leonardo's *invenzione*, Michelangelo's muscularity, and Mannerist sensuality into an original depiction of a young adult man. This is in sharp contrast to other depictions of John the Baptist with an old and emaciated body, which encourage us to reflect on his hermetical lifestyle. Tosini's painting emphasizes characteristics of innocence, determination, and strength—traits that served the young prophet well when he cried out in the wilderness for God's people to "prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." He reminds us of the great vigor and intensity required by John the Baptist's spiritual preparation and expectant waiting for the coming of the Christ in whom "all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

NOTE

[†] Heidi J. Hornik, *Michele Tosini and the Ghirlandaio Workshop in Cinquecento Florence* (Brighton, U.K., and Portland, Oregon: Sussex Academic Press, 2009), 110-116.



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O God Among Us, Come

A Metrical Translation of the “O Antiphons”

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

- 1 O Highest Wisdom, come.
While reaching end to end
in sweetness ord’ring all,
to us, O mighty Savior,
discerning judgment, teach.
- 2 O Lord of Israel, come.
Through bushes breathing fire,
to Moses you gave Law;
O come, redeeming Ruler,
with arms outstretched to save.
- 3 O Root of Jesse, come.
This ensign raised for all
to whom the nations pray,
before whom kings keep silent:
to rescue quickly come.
- 4 O Key of David, come.
Unlock what none shall bind,
and lock what none shall loose:
the captives in the darkness
imprisoned, now set free.
- 5 O glorious Dayspring, come.
The bright eternal light
and sun of righteousness,
on those who sit in darkness
and death’s cruel shadow, shine.
- 6 O King of Nations, come.
The hope and cornerstone
who makes from many, one,
you fashioned us in Eden—
your earthen vessels, save.
- 7 O God Among Us, come.
Great king, who gives the Law
to gather nations nigh,
O Lord our God, Redeemer,
to save your children, come.

O God Among Us, Come

ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

KURT KAISER

mf

O High-est — Wis-dom, come. While

mf

5

reach - ing end to end in sweet - ness or - d'ring all, to
bush - es breath - ing fire, to Mo - ses you gave Law; O
en - sign raised for all to whom the na - tions pray, be -
lock what none shall bind, and lock what none shall loose: the
bright e - ter - nal light and sun of right - eous - ness, on
hope and cor - ner - stone who makes from ma - ny, one, you
king, who gives the Law to ga - ther na - tions, nigh, O

5

mf

Note to musician: distinctive accompaniment for first two measures of verses 2 through 7 are provided on p. 65.

9

us, O migh - ty Sa - vior, dis - cer - ning judg - ment teach. O
 come, re - deem - ing Ru - ler, with arms out - stretched to save. O
 fore whom kings keep si - lent: to res - cue quick - ly come. O
 cap - tives in the dark - ness im - pri - soned, now set free. O
 those who sit in dark - ness and death's cruel sha - dow, shine. O
 fash - ioned us in E - den your earth - en ves - sels, save. O
 Lord our God, Re - deem - er, to save your child - ren come.

9

Strongly

Verse 2

mp *Go to bar 5*

Lord of — Is - rael, come. Through

Verse 3

mf *Go to bar 5*

Root of — Jes - se, come. This

Verse 4

mf *Go to bar 5*

Key of — Da - vid, come. Un -

Verse 5

f *Go to bar 5*

glo - ri - ous Day - spring, come. The

Verse 6

f *Go to bar 5*

King of — Na - tions, come. The

Verse 7

f *Go to bar 5*

God A - mong Us, come. Great

These seven prayers—the Great Antiphons, or O Antiphons—are among the richest treasures of Advent. With a montage of haunting biblical images of creation, redemption, and ultimate restoration they remind us that Christ, whose glorious return we anticipate and patiently await during Advent, is surrounding and sustaining us already. He is truly Emmanuel, “God among us,” for he is at once the wisdom who creates and orders the universe, the lawgiver who establishes righteousness through Israel and the Church, the redeemer who has overcome death and rescued his creation from sin, and the great king who is drawing his children from every nation and restoring them in love.

These ancient prayers—collected in Rome by the eighth century, though some of the component prayers may be centuries older—are simple in form: after addressing God in Christ with a striking Messianic title drawn from Israel’s prophetic writings, each one describes a gracious act of God and offers a petition apropos to its description of Christ. In seven various, but interrelated ways they voice the ultimate petition of Scripture—“Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20). Collectively they also suggest Christ’s response to that plea: the seven titles in Latin—*Sapientia, Adonai, Radix Jesse, Clavis David, Oriens, Rex Gentium, and Emmanuel*—in reverse order form an acrostic ERO CRAS which means “I am coming soon.”

This beautiful call and response structure of the O Antiphons is unfortunately lost in English translation. No translation captures the acrostic reply, of course, and most metrical translations fail to reproduce the tripartite structure of the prayers. We have tried to render singable texts with a melody and accompaniment that highlight the original form of these petitions.

Traditionally during the final Advent vesper services on December 17 through 23, one of these antiphons is said or chanted before and after the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55)—allowing each antiphon to cast its distinctive light on Mary’s rejoicing over the gracious acts of God to Israel that are being fulfilled through her. We present them in a similar way—as framing devices for a period of Scripture reading and reflection—in the short prayer services that follow. Alternatively, these antiphons may be sung separately or together as a hymn during Advent worship services, or used to create in a single service of Advent music and lessons. We provide an example of the latter worship service, as well as a simplified version of the antiphons (with melody and verses only), online at www.ChristianEthics.ws.

O HIGHEST WISDOM, COME

Call to Prayer: Amos 5:8

Seek him who made the Pleiades and Orion,
and turns deep darkness into the morning,
and darkens the day into night,
who calls for the waters of the sea,
and pours them out on the surface of the earth,
the LORD is his name.

First Antiphon

O Highest Wisdom, come.
While reaching end to end
in sweetness ord'ring all,
to us, O mighty Savior,
discerning judgment, teach.

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 11:2-3a

The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

Epistle Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Gospel Reading: John 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came

into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Silent Reflection

First Antiphon

The Lord's Prayer

Concluding Prayer

Lord God,
fill our hearts with your love
and our minds with your wisdom
so that our actions will be pleasing to you.

May your peace, which surpasses all understanding,
guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, through your Holy Spirit.
Amen.

O LORD OF ISRAEL, COME

Call to Prayer: Psalm 119:55

I remember your name in the night, O LORD,
and keep your law.

Second Antiphon

O Lord of Israel, come.
Through bushes breathing fire,
to Moses you gave Law;
O come, redeeming Ruler,
with arms outstretched to save.

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 11:3b-5

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,

and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

Epistle Reading: Galatians 6:1-5

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves. All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride. For all must carry their own loads.

Gospel Reading: Matthew 7:24-29

"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell – and great was its fall!"

Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

Silent Reflection

Second Antiphon

The Lord's Prayer

Concluding Prayer

Lord God,
fill our hearts with zeal
and our minds with saving knowledge of your way
so that our actions will be pleasing to you.

May your peace, which surpasses all understanding,
guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, through your Holy Spirit.
Amen.

O ROOT OF JESSE, COME

Call to Prayer: Psalm 54:2

Hear my prayer, O God;
give ear to the words of my mouth.

Third Antiphon

O Root of Jesse, come.
This ensign raised for all
to whom the nations pray,
before whom kings keep silent:
to rescue quickly come.

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 11:1, 10

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples;
the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Epistle Reading: Romans 15:7-9, 12

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you,
for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of
the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might con-
firm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles
might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

“Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles,
and sing praises to your name”;

and again Isaiah says,

“The root of Jesse shall come,
the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;
in him the Gentiles shall hope.”

Gospel Reading: Luke 1:26-33

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in
Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was
Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he
came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Silent Reflection

Third Antiphon

The Lord's Prayer

Concluding Prayer

Lord God,
fill our hearts with love for all nations
and our minds with understanding to serve them
so that our actions will be pleasing to you.

May your peace, which surpasses all understanding,
guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, through your Holy Spirit.
Amen.

O KEY OF DAVID, COME

Call to Prayer: Psalm 42:8

By day the LORD commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.

Fourth Antiphon

O Key of David, come.
Unlock what none shall bind,
and lock what none shall loose:
the captives in the darkness
imprisoned, now set free.

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 9:6-7

For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

Epistle Reading: Revelation 3:7, 11-12

“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:
These are the words of the holy one, the true one,
who has the key of David,
who opens and no one will shut,
who shuts and no one opens:

“I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.”

Gospel Reading: Matthew 16:13-19

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Silent Reflection

Fourth Antiphon

The Lord's Prayer

Concluding Prayer

Lord God,
fill our hearts with love for one another
and our minds with wise counsel
so that our actions will be pleasing to you.

May your peace, which surpasses all understanding,
guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, through your Holy Spirit.
Amen.

O GLORIOUS DAYSPRING, COME

Call to Prayer: Psalm 139:11-12

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

Fifth Antiphon

O glorious Dayspring, come.
The bright eternal light
and sun of righteousness,
on those who sit in darkness
and death's cruel shadow, shine.

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 9:1-2

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time the LORD brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness —
on them light has shined.

Epistle Reading: Revelation 22:16

“It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.”

The Benedictus / Song of Zechariah: Luke 1:68-79

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all
who hate us.
Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.

*Silent Reflection**Fifth Antiphon**The Lord's Prayer**Concluding Prayer*

Lord God,
fill our hearts with mercy
and our minds with discernment
so that our actions will be pleasing to you.

May your peace, which surpasses all understanding,
guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, through your Holy Spirit.
Amen.

O KING OF NATIONS, COME

Call to Prayer: Psalm 65:1-2

Praise is due to you,
O God, in Zion;
and to you shall vows be performed,
O you who answer prayer!
To you all flesh shall come.

Sixth Antiphon

O King of Nations, come.
The hope and cornerstone
who makes from many, one,
you fashioned us in Eden —
your earthen vessels, save.

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 28:16-17

Therefore thus says the Lord GOD,
See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone,
a tested stone,
a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation:
“One who trusts will not panic.”

And I will make justice the line,
and righteousness the plummet;
hail will sweep away the refuge of lies,
and waters will overwhelm the shelter of falsehood.

Epistle Reading: Ephesians 2:17-22

So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Gospel Reading: Matthew 21:33-42

“Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them, saying, ‘They will respect my son.’ But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.’ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” They said to him, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.”

Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures:

‘The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord’s doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes’”?

*Silent Reflection**Sixth Antiphon**The Lord’s Prayer**Concluding Prayer*

Lord God,
fill our hearts with hope
and our minds with welcome for your restoring grace
so that our actions will be pleasing to you.

May your peace, which surpasses all understanding,
guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, through your Holy Spirit.
Amen.

O GOD AMONG US, COME

Call to Prayer: Psalm 141:2

Let my prayer be counted as incense before you,
and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice.

Seventh Antiphon

O God Among Us, come.
Great king, who gives the Law
to gather nations nigh,
O Lord our God, Redeemer,
to save your children, come.

Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 7:14

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

Gospel Reading: Matthew 1:20b-23

An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us."

The Magnificat / Song of Mary: Luke 1:46-55

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

Silent Reflection

Seventh Antiphon

The Lord's Prayer

Concluding Prayer

Lord God,
fill our hearts with joy
and our minds with perception of your presence
so that our actions will be pleasing to you.

May your peace, which surpasses all understanding,
guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, through your Holy Spirit.
Amen.

The Advent Invitation

BY LARRY PARSLEY

Advent presents the Church with an engraved invitation. A countdown clock has begun for Christ's return engagement, and the fact that only God can read the numbers on the clock does not eliminate our need to respond enthusiastically to the invitation.

When you reach into the mailbox, you notice right away that one of the envelopes is not like the others. The cream-colored paper is made of a heavier bond, and your name is rendered in a fancy script. As you unseal the flap on the envelope, you realize that what you hold in your hands is no piece of junk mail.

You have received an invitation. Your hostess has chosen you from among many other potential invitees, and with the honor of the invitation goes the responsibility of an honorable response. You mark the date on your calendar, make preparations to dress appropriately, and bring gifts certain to please your hostess. All of this must be done in a timely fashion. Once the invitation is received, a countdown clock begins.

Advent presents the Church with an engraved invitation. The discerning believer recognizes a difference between this invitation and the other urgent parcels which flood our lives in December. The Christ who once visited Bethlehem has promised a return engagement, this time with much greater fanfare. A countdown clock has begun and the fact that only God can read the numbers on the clock does not eliminate the Christian's need to respond enthusiastically to the invitation.

TICK, TICK, TICK...

In the Apostle Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome I can almost hear the ticking of an alarm clock in the background.

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Romans 13:11-14

Paul reminds his hearers that they “know what time it is” (13:11). What time is it? It is time for a fundamental change of posture and outlook. Off with the pajamas and sleeping through life! It is time to get up and out of bed, to don garments appropriate for the daytime. It may still be dark outside—sometimes 5:35 a.m. is just as dark as midnight. But the believer’s faith is like an internal body clock, intuiting that “the night is far gone, the day is near” (13:12).

It is past time to lay aside the “works of darkness” (13:12) because the manifestation of our glorious salvation is imminent. Our labor in the kingdom of God will soon culminate with an invitation to the King’s table. Our attitude, especially during the Advent season, is to pay close attention to the “tick tock” of time.

When Paul describes the “night life,” his examples are stark and severe. No doubt some of his Gentile hearers recalled with sadness nights they spent in a drunken stupor or inappropriate sexual liaisons. Other listeners perhaps remembered seasons of a marriage, or seasons of a life, dominated by “quarreling and jealousy” (13:13). But now the Spirit of God in each and every heart, like an alarm clock, is urging believers to move beyond what the Country and Western singer Freddy Fender once referred to as “wasted days and wasted nights.” Now is the time, Paul intimates, to leap from bed with the adrenaline rush of one who knows she has overslept, and tend to the important daytime business that awaits us.

Now is the time to robe ourselves with what Paul refers to first as the “armor of light” (13:12). Paul instructs us to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (13:14).

A HOLY CONSPIRACY

A sad realization we reached in our congregation recently is that this holy Advent season often finds us lounging in our feet-in pajamas. The season of Advent is co-opted by the season of Tinsel—a season of selfishness, as we drop broad hints about the gifts we want for Christmas, and then drive to the “After Christmas Sales” to purchase for ourselves what our family failed to give us. It is a season of stress, as our calendars are over-booked and our credit cards are overtaxed. It is a season of hurry and short

tempers, as we warn our children that we may ask Santa to skip our house this year. We might as well sing, “Have yourselves a *crummy* little Christmas.”

Several years ago our congregation was blessed to discover the Advent Conspiracy movement that mourns the fact that our obsessive, consumption-focused Decembers cause us to sleep through Advent. This movement conspires against the forces of consumption and stress, creating time and space to *worship fully, spend less, give more, and love all*.¹

As our church has participated in Advent Conspiracy, we have endeavored to simplify our calendars to create more time for worshipping the newborn King. We have asked permission from family members and friends to not buy them gadgets they will never use, instead making gifts of money in their names to drill water wells in Kenya.

We have also emphasized giving handmade and relational gifts. A couple years ago, in addition to modest gifts under the tree, I gave each of my children an index card. On one side of the card I wrote what I admired most about them; on the other side I wrote about an activity I hoped to do with them in the coming weeks.

Advent Conspiracy has made a big difference among so many in our congregation, helping us to make good on the “debt of love” that Paul speaks about in Romans 13:8. It has helped us, in small but significant ways, to clothe ourselves with Jesus Christ and share the light of his attentive love with people near to us and far from us. It has helped us to traffic in a different kind of currency: less credit card debt and more personal investment. Best of all, when December 25 rolls around, we realize that we have not slept through the angelic choir and the summons to Bethlehem. Advent Conspiracy has taught us that the days of selfish indulgence in December are long past, in light of the fact that our salvation draws near. Our high privilege and holy responsibility is to clothe ourselves with Christ, extending his life saving love to others.

KNOWING WHAT TIME IT IS

A retired police detective, Yukio Shige, would be entitled to live out his golden years lounging around his home in his pajamas, doing crossword puzzles. But instead, he spends his days outfitted in white gloves, a floppy hat, and binoculars. He patrols the Tojinbo cliffs along the western coast of Japan, his eyes peeled for those solitary walkers who carry no camera to capture the amazing views, but rather hang their heads and stare at the ground. He focuses his binoculars on three specific spots on the cliffs where such walkers are most likely to leap to their death. Japan has one of the highest suicide rates in the world, and the recent economic downturn has only exacerbated the problem.

When Shige sees someone whose appearance concerns him, he approaches them with a gentle “hello,” a smile, and a light touch on the shoulder. He invites them back to his office for tea and a sticky rice dish that often reminds

his guests of their childhood. Over a five year period, Yukio Shige's work has helped to thwart 188 potential suicides.²

Now there is a man who knows what time it is!

Around my house, there is one morning of the year when our children always wake up before their parents. They sleep fitfully on the evening of December 24, and the first child up sounds an alarm until all four of my children are at my door, asking if they can run downstairs and see what is under the Christmas tree. Who can blame them?

As they grow in their faith, my children are learning to listen to another alarm. The Spirit's call to the Church this Advent season is to listen for the ticking of the clock and remember that each day is a summons. The days of wasting hours in self-indulgence are long gone, and the coming of our salvation is just across the horizon. Advent gives us cause to wake up and conspire against those dark forces that war against our souls and keep our world in misery. The Spirit calls us to outfit ourselves with nothing less than the character of Jesus Christ, and to share his life-giving love with all those who are searching for hope.

NOTES

1 The Advent Conspiracy's Web site, www.adventconspiracy.org, offers plenty of resources for congregations. The "conspiracy" was the brainstorm of five pastors in 2006. The online project represents a collaboration among Rick McKinley of Imago Dei Community in Portland, Oregon, Greg Holder from Windsor Crossing in St. Louis, Missouri, and Chris Seay of Ecclesia in Houston, Texas.

2 Yukio Shige's story is told in Coco Masters, "Postcard: Tojinbo Cliffs," *Time*, June 22, 2009, www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1904132-2,00.html (accessed June 30, 2010).



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Meeting God in the Church Year

BY KIMBERLEE CONWAY IRETON

**Though they view the church year through different lens,
all four authors of the books reviewed here want their
readers to know what they know: that living this way
shapes our lives into a cruciform pattern in which we,
as followers of Jesus, become more and more like him.**

Most of my childhood spiritual formation occurred in the context of an Assemblies of God elementary school. Weekly chapel and Bible memory verses formed the spine of my understanding of faith. In junior high and high school, I internalized much of what I had learned in elementary school and embraced it as my own. But my faith really came alive when I learned of older traditions, ones that had been around for centuries, ones with strange customs like marking foreheads with ashes or refraining from the word “Alleluia” for weeks on end. Such customs fascinated me, and through them I slowly entered into the tradition variously known as the liturgical year, the church year, and the Christian year.

I’m not alone in my hunger for traditions that are older than I am. Renewed interest in liturgical expressions of faith among Christians of many denominations has recently sparked a spate of books on the Christian year. Each of the four books reviewed here approaches the church year from a slightly different perspective and with a different primary audience in view.



The most accessible book for those with little to no experience of the church year is Bobby Gross’s *Living the Christian Year: Time to Inhabit the Story of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009, 332 pp., \$17.00). Part introduction, part devotional guide, the book begins with a helpful overview of the

church year. In each succeeding section, Gross delves deeper into one of the church's seasons, holding it up to the light and showing its various facets and themes. Each section concludes with prayers, scripture readings, and reflections for each week of the season.

Gross grounds his discussion of the Christian year in his own life, sharing

Bobby Gross loves the church year. He shares his struggles and the practices that have been most meaningful for him and invites readers to join him in those practices. This is a book I will return to again and again.

parts of his story to illustrate or illuminate some aspect of the season he is discussing. For instance, in his introduction to Lent, he explores his response to a piece of artwork entitled *Grace and Gravity*, including a poem he wrote. The poem turned out to be prophetic, though it was many weeks before he realized it was preparing him for a spiritually dry time of metaphorical

desert wandering—a time that left him feeling a spiritual failure, providentially coinciding with Lent. When he reread the poem during Easter, he realized:

Yes, I had been in the desert, but I had not been alone. Yes, I had been tested, but I had not failed. And yes, I had been humbled, but in turning from my spiritual pride and sense of entitlement, I was now open to a new encounter with God's transforming presence. (p. 127)

It is this very downward movement of the soul, a spiritual gravity—a descent into the grave—that is at the heart of Lent.

Throughout the book, such stories ground the seasons of the church year in real life and provide a way for the reader to enter into them. These stories also reinforce that Bobby Gross loves the church year. He has lived these seasons for years, and he mines their depths and richness not for their own sakes but as a means of drawing nearer to God in Christ. He shares both his struggles and the practices that have been most meaningful for him, inviting readers to join him in those practices.

The lion's share of this book is the weekly devotions: for each week of each season Gross has included several prayers, scripture readings, and short reflections. I used this book through much of Lent and Easter as the centerpiece of my morning devotions this year. Each day I prayed the prayers for the week, read one of the Scriptures, and reflected on it using Gross's meditations and questions as a starting point.

This is a book I will return to again and again, both for information about the seasons of the church year and for formation in my walk with Christ.



Joan Chittister's book, *The Liturgical Year: The Spiraling Adventure of the Spiritual Life* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009, 240 pp., \$17.99), is part of Thomas Nelson's "Ancient Practices" series, which is intended for "every Christian seeker who wants more." However, this is not a book for newbies to the church year.

For one thing, the structure of the book is confusing. There is no overview of the Christian year until chapter four. Advent, which marks the beginning of the church year, does not appear until chapter nine. Interspersed with chapters on the various seasons are thematically-related chapters on joy, asceticism, suffering, celebration, and fidelity – but those thematic correspondences will only be obvious to someone already familiar with the texture of the Christian year.

Indeed, Chittister assumes throughout the book that readers will be familiar with the church year, particularly with Roman Catholic expressions of it. She writes of vigils, masses, feasts, fasts, and cycles of lectionary readings, often without explanation. Readers not raised with or exposed to Catholic liturgy will likely be perplexed by many of these references.

Further, Chittister makes sweeping statements about the transformative potential of the church year that come across as if those potentialities are, instead, inevitabilities. For instance: "Nowhere more than in the liturgical year is that presence [of Christ] felt and seen and heard" (p. 15); "Perhaps nothing so serves to keep the Christian aware of all [the] dimensions of life than does the progress of liturgical time" (p. 39); and "[The liturgical year] gives us the energy to become the fullness of ourselves" (p. 59).

Perhaps my skepticism about such claims comes from my not having lived the Christian year long enough – my own experience with the seasons of the year began a mere fifteen years ago – whereas Chittister is a cradle Catholic and has been living these seasons her whole life. It is entirely possible that these claims emerge from her experience.

If this is the case, I wish she had couched those claims in individual rather than universal terms. Throughout the book, I felt a disconnect between my lived experience of the seasons and Chittister's universalizing claims of what the church year was supposed to be effecting in the lives of the faithful. For this reason alone, I would not recommend the book to anyone unfamiliar with the rhythms and seasons of the liturgical calendar. Even for someone (like me) who has lived those seasons for a number of years, this book might be discouraging, given its tendency toward exalted rhetoric and its lack of on-the-ground discourse about *how* exactly the church year does all that Chittister claims it does.

Occasionally, Chittister grounds her discussion in a specific example. She tells, for instance, how her own monastic community celebrates Maundy Thursday – the transition from high-spirited celebration to silent contemplation. Though her community's observance of this day is not immediately trans-

ferrable to my life or the life of my local congregation, reading about it helped me see Maundy Thursday in a new light and gave me ideas about how to incorporate both celebration and silence in my own life and home on this day.

Unfortunately, such concrete illustrations were the exception rather than the rule. I wanted more of them, especially from someone like Chittister who has lived the church year far longer and far more deeply than I have.

Robert Webber expands our understanding of Epiphany spirituality: it calls us to a rich relationship—indeed a union—of believers with Christ so that God’s glory might be manifest in us and through us.

For those who have lived with the liturgical year for a long time, some of Chittister’s explanations of its various aspects may prove helpful. I found her explanation of an octave instructive and vivid—“Like incense, an octave is the sweet memory, eight days later, of what has gone before” (p. 92). Her read on Ordinary Time as a pause

“between the two poles [i.e., the birth and death] of Jesus” was likewise interesting: the two seasons of Ordinary Time “give us time to contemplate the intersection between the life of Jesus and our own” (p. 97).

Chittister insists that this focus on the Jesus-story, on our re-living and internalizing it, is the *raison d’être* of the church year. In fact, her insistence on this is one of the book’s strongest messages, a message that all who observe the church calendar would do well to keep foremost in our practice.



Robert Webber’s *Ancient-Future Time: Forming Spirituality through the Christian Year* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004, 206 pp., \$18.00) is more academic in approach and content than either Bobby Gross’s or Joan Chittister’s books. Despite this, readers who have some theological education or occasionally read books of theology or liturgy will have no problem following *Ancient-Future Time*.

Webber’s intended audience, it seems, are pastors and lay leaders. While I, as a layperson, found this book rich and rewarding, I think it holds most potential for those who lead and plan worship services.

It seems that Webber intends to convert a slightly skeptical audience, people who are open to liturgical expressions of faith but also unsure of how to explain or defend them to others. His first chapter, therefore, offers a defense of the Christian year as well as an introduction to it.

From there he introduces “The Cycle of Light” — Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany — devoting a chapter to each season or day. These chapters

are followed by “The Cycle of Life” – Lent, the Triduum (Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday), Easter, and the time after Pentecost – again, with a chapter devoted to each.

Webber’s purpose is not historical; it is spiritual. Thus, throughout the book he focuses on the spiritual import of the day or season under discussion. For instance, in his chapter on Epiphany, he emphasizes that “through this event [the coming of the Magi], we are to experience a manifestation of our own spirituality” (p. 76). Or to put it more baldly, Epiphany spirituality is “a mandate to be a witness to Christ in our everyday working lives, . . . a mandate that cannot be denied. We are [Christ’s] body, the church. And the church is a movement sent on a mission by God – a mission that involves us all” (p. 80). Webber then expands this understanding of Epiphany spirituality: it calls us to a rich relationship – indeed a union – of believers with Christ so that God’s glory (the theme of Epiphany) might be manifest *in us* and *through us*.

In each chapter, Webber pulls out such themes from the season’s scripture readings and reflects on the season’s spiritual emphasis. He includes practical disciplines for each season, to help readers enter more deeply into the spiritual reality of the church year – and thus into union with Christ, which is, he insists, the whole point of entering into and living the Christian year in the first place.

At the close of each chapter, Webber includes a summary of that chapter’s themes and spiritual emphases as well as a prayer for the season, questions for reflection, and worship and preaching resources for those in church leadership roles.



If Robert Webber’s book is somewhat academic in tone, Adolf Adam’s is more so. The intended audience of *The Liturgical Year: Its History and Its Meaning after the Reform of the Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990 [reprint Verlag Herder, 1979], 324 pp., \$34.95) is theology teachers and students and those involved in the instruction of Christians in churches, particularly Roman Catholic churches. It is not the book for someone new to the church year. For those who have read other books on the Christian year and have lived its seasons for awhile, Adam’s book is a fascinating look at the history of the seasons and the way they have evolved over the centuries – though it focuses specifically on Catholic expressions of the liturgical year.

Adam begins with a reflection on cosmic time; he then moves into a discussion of the Jewish festal calendar, which is the framework from which the Christian calendar emerged. The heart and soul of the Christian year, Adam claims, is the paschal mystery – called Communion, Eucharist, or the Lord’s Supper, depending on the tradition – and he spends a great deal of time unpacking this mystery and the history of its celebration in the Church, including an entire chapter on Sunday as the original “pasch.”

Because of his emphasis on the centrality of the Eucharist, Adam structures

his book with Easter coming before Christmas. This is a theological move: Easter, with its historical and theological links to Passover and thus to the Lord's Supper, is the center of the Christian year. It is the reason—the *logos*, if you will—for all the other seasons and makes sense of them.

From Easter, Adam works his way backward, liturgically speaking, through the Triduum and Lent. Only after he has unpacked the history and meaning of the Easter cycle does he introduce Christmas. Here again, he works backward, with Advent following his discussion of Christmas Day. However, after Advent, he returns to the season of Christmas and thence to Epiphany.

Following his discussion of the two major cycles—Easter and Christmas—Adam ventures into Ordinary Time. Because of his Roman Catholic emphasis, he devotes much of this chapter to “The Feasts of the Lord” that fall during Ordinary Time (including Trinity, Transfiguration, and Christ the King). The penultimate (and longest) chapter focuses on saints' days. This is followed by a short chapter on the liturgy of the hours and its relation to the church year.

While Adam's book is not for the faint of heart, it is a fascinating look at the evolution of the liturgical year and its meaning for contemporary Christians.

Each of these authors views the church year through a different lens—Gross and Webber are evangelicals who came to this practice as adults; Chittister grew up breathing the air of liturgy; and Adam approaches it with both an academic and a spiritual interest—but all four writers clearly want their readers to see what they see when they look at the church year: a way of marking time, of *living*, that centers on the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. More, they want their readers to know what they know: that living in such a way shapes our lives into a cruciform pattern in which we, as followers of Jesus, become more and more like him.



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Taking Advent Seriously

BY MARK OLDENBURG

The season of Advent is widely ignored, being sucked into the gravity well of Christmas, or misunderstood as entirely a preparation for the Nativity. These four resources—wonderful guides for personal or group reflection—shine a reassuring light on the true nature of Advent, presenting healthy, faithful, and attractive ways to observe the season.

The past thousand years or so have not been kind to the season of Advent. The most obvious problem is Advent being sucked into the gravity well of Christmas. There is no need to complain once again about a culture and a church that begin celebrating Christmas on the Sunday after Thanksgiving (at the very latest), ignoring Advent entirely. About the only remnant of the season is the Advent calendar, and more and more of them picture rather than progressively reveal the Nativity.

But, being widely ignored is only one of Advent's problems. Even among the few who observe the season, many explain it as entirely a preparation for the celebration of Christmas. Now those cursed with knowledge of history know that this explanation twists around the development of the season. Back in the first millennium, apart from Rome, Advent seems to have been significantly older than Christmas. More to the point, however, this excludes all the eschatological emphases of Advent, all of the characters (like the adult John the Baptist) who prepare for the future coming of the Lord, and Isaiah's visions of all-inclusive, global, and even cosmic *shalom*. In fact, it excludes all those aids that would help keep the celebration of Christmas from vapid sentimentality, all those proclamations that remind us what it means that "the hopes and fears of all the years" were and are met in Bethlehem. Keeping Advent entirely as a preparation for Christmas empties not only Advent but Christmas of its meaning.

Another problem does not empty the two seasons of meaning, but twists them. That problem is celebrating Advent as a way of getting ready for the Nativity. By saying that “during these four weeks, we are preparing for Christ to be born,” we encourage make-believe in a way beyond even the purveyors of the Santa myth. Advent and Christmas become time machines,

Presenting very different ways of keeping the season and aiming at very different audiences, these four devotional resources witness to and reward the diversity of the delights of Advent.

taking us back to the days before the Incarnation; and so we focus on the Nativity to the exclusion of everything else. Gone is the notion that we are in the “meantime” between the Incarnation and the Eschaton. Gone is the opportunity for our honest cry that things are not as God has promised they would be. Gone even is the notion that God comes to us here and now, where we are, in our rush to pre-

tend our way back to “when Jesus was alive.” We may echo the prayers of those who awaited the Incarnation, but what we await is a different day of the already incarnated Lord.

A final problem for poor, beleaguered Advent is the season being overshadowed not by Christmas, but by Lent. Now that Advent has its own color in many traditions (and therefore its own iconography, rather than the Lenten violet vestments), and now that penitence has become one among many themes of Lent, rather than the sole preoccupation of that season, this problem is a bit diminished. But there are still those who yearn to celebrate Advent as joylessly as possible – a strange desire when confident hoping is one of the season’s central themes – and to make penitence as central to it as it once was to Lent.



Yet if the four resources reviewed here are any indication, things are looking up for Advent. In the midst of all these problems and dangers, they shine a reassuring light and fall into none of them. Even better, they present healthy, faithful, and attractive ways of observing Advent. This fidelity is all the more valuable since they present very different ways of keeping the season, and aim at four very different audiences. They witness to and reward the diversity of the delights of Advent. While all of them go beyond that season, providing devotional resources for the twelve days of Christmas and the festival of Epiphany, the bulk of each is spent in the four weeks of Advent.

Aimed at those who are interested in setting aside several times each day for individual prayer, Phyllis Tickle's *Christmastide: Prayers for Advent through Epiphany from The Divine Hours* (New York: Galilee, 2003, 272 pp., \$9.95) is in many ways the most straightforward. Taken from Tickle's larger manual, *The Divine Hours: Prayers for Autumn and Wintertime* (2000), the book is made up of prayers, psalms, and readings for use at morning, midday, and evening, together with a single service for each season to be used at bedtime. The services are complete—there is no need to transfer to a Bible or hymn book, nor is there space provided for additional intercessory prayers—and set up for individual use (although Tickle notes that changing "I's" to "we's" in prayers would allow for occasional corporate use as well). Each service begins with a Call to Prayer, Request for Presence, and Greeting (all scriptural), a short biblical reading and a psalm (interspersed with a refrain), a Cry of the Church, the Lord's Prayer, and concluding prayers. In the evening services, the reading is replaced with a hymn text.

The readings, hymns, and psalms are imaginatively chosen, reflecting seasonal themes well. This resource would be magnificent for an introvert because it rewards meditative digging into passages. Exactly for that reason, however, it requires of the user a certain familiarity with biblical themes and liturgical rhythms, and an ability and willingness to meditate on the passages presented without introduction or encouragement. It would not be a good choice for a seeker, nor for someone who expects the resource to spark intercessory prayer.



Mary Lou Redding's *While We Wait: Living the Questions of Advent* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2002, 136 pp., \$12.00), on the other hand, is intended for use by the members of a group. The book provides a way for the daily reflections of each member to be brought together at a weekly meeting. It centers on a particular biblical story for each week and a question that is asked by one of the characters within that story. Redding provides an explanation and reflection on each week's story, as well as scripture passages, reflection questions, and breath prayers for each day between the weekly meetings. The stories of Tamar, Ruth, the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth, the Annunciation, and the Magi are both well-chosen and well explained. In her weekly introduction, Redding does a fine job of setting the story within the larger narrative. A participant would not already need to be familiar with Scripture to understand the story and its context and to take part in the reflections.

The reflections are personal as well as biblical and would encourage both reflection and self-revelation from the members of the group. While the themes of social transformation and liberation are mentioned rarely in this resource, the theme of hope (especially personal hope) is dealt with

especially well. Since hope and hopelessness are so often tied up with childlessness in these stories, and since that issue could be a sensitive one in groups, Redding made the wise decision to leave that aspect of the theme to group discussion rather than commenting on it herself. It would have been good to include this issue, however, in the suggestions for group leadership. As is often the case, the suggestions for group organization and leadership are not particularly helpful. The stories and reflections are so powerful that a leader would be well advised simply to ask, “what occurred to you during your prayers this week?” and just get out of the way!



In *O Come Emmanuel: A Musical Tour of Daily Readings for Advent and Christmas* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006, 165 pp., \$15.95), Gordon Giles mines the magnificent musical heritage of Advent. He provides a scripture reading, musical example, and reflection for each day in Advent and Christmas. The musical examples are usually hymns that are provided, but in two cases where the example is a larger piece—J. S. Bach’s *Christmas Oratorio* and Gian Carlo Menotti’s *Amahl and the Night Visitors*—Giles describes the work rather than quoting it entire. Because the musical treasury of Advent is so rich, this resource is itself particularly rich as well, touching most of the themes of Advent, from expectation through *shalom*. Giles varies his commentaries, sometimes simply describing the musical work and its composition, sometimes waxing homiletic. The work only rarely betrays its English background by assuming familiarity with works unfamiliar to American readers. Unfortunately, several of those examples are in the first few days, so readers might need to be encouraged to stay with the program early on.

Those interested in music would be the natural readers of this work. It would be a wonderful devotional to use with choir members, for instance. It could be used individually, but discussion questions for a weekly gathering are provided. (Again, a good leader would do a better job on her own.) There are a few errors in fact—the Magnificat is not Mary’s response to the angel at the Annunciation, for instance. The reflections as a whole, however, are interesting, solid, and wide-ranging. And at least one—the second reflection on “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel”—deserves to become a classic, especially among church musicians.



Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004, 330 pp., \$16.00), edited by members of the Bruderhof movement, is nothing but classics. Providing daily readings, appropriate to the season, from authors from John Chrysostom to Dorothee Soelle, it is hands down, full blown, knock your socks off magnificent.

The selections are of different lengths, from a few paragraphs to full sermons. There are no weekly themes, no set scriptural patterns, no discussion

questions, just meaty, accessible, varied, enjoyable meditations on Advent and its themes. Some of the authors are well known; the cover assures buyers that C. S. Lewis, Thomas Merton, Annie Dillard, Madeleine L'Engle, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer are represented. Others are known but unexpected, like Sylvia Plath. Some might be unknown to the reader – the collection starts with an article by the nineteenth-century German healer, evangelist, and social worker Christoph Friederich Blumhardt (may his tribe increase!) – but will not remain unknown for long.

This book is obviously intended for individual use, but the selections are so evocative that it would be difficult not to gather together to share favorite passages and trade insights with other readers. The Advent characteristic all of the authors share is a startling honesty. Alfred Delp's contribution begins, "There is perhaps nothing we modern people need more than to be genuinely shaken up," and this collection provides the shaking. The authors disagree with each other, and with the reader's preconceptions, in a most lively, inviting, refreshing, and salutary way.

Each of these books provides an entry into the delights and gifts of Advent. Each of them guarantees that the themes of hoping, waiting, rejoicing, and preparing are explored and enjoyed. Each of them assures that the characters of Advent – Mary, John the Baptist, Elizabeth, Nicholas of Myra, Lucy, and many others – become familiar friends and models. Each takes Advent seriously, and invites us to do the same. Each is a wonderful companion and guide for this season when our business is to recognize that we live in the meantime, when the promises of God are already but not yet fulfilled. Each helps us to cry out, with heart, hand, and voice, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."



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